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BEFORE CAPTAIN CRISPO HAD TIME TO REALIZE THE SITUATION, HE WAS LYING FLAT ON HIS BACK,
AND THE "INVADER" WAS KNEELING ON HIS BREAST.

Kentuck Talbot's Band;

OR,

THE RED LASSO.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATAL LASSO.

"Too late!"

The terse exclamation fell from bloodless lips and in a voice that was almost a groan, while he who had spoken stared straight ahead like a man who sees a ghost.

The scene was in Mexico, at a time when the war between that country and the United States was at its height, and dark deeds were perpetrated along the boundary line.

It was a struggle marked by lawless acts, for the Mexicans, as a people, are not noted for great magnanimity, and their hatred for the "accursed invaders" was bitter in the extreme.

"Too late!"

The man who had thus spoken sat at the head of a party of horsemen numbering two-score. It needed but one glance at their faces and dress to see they were Texas Rangers, and a valiant looking band were they.

White foam clung thickly upon the sides and flanks of the horses they bestrode, for they had ridden fast and far—ridden thus, only to arrive too late.

They had come to succor a party of their own countrymen, who, they had heard, were penned up in a wretched hovel by a superior force of Mexicans, and, led by one who was deeply interested, they had ridden madly until the adobe dwelling appeared before them.

One glance at it, however, was enough to dash their hopes to the ground, for in the silent field around the place, and in the broken walls and down-fallen gate of the building, they read a story as unwelcome as it was comprehensible.

They had arrived too late to take part in the red drama, and they could foresee but one end which could have come to the affray.

The man who had guided them to the spot was the same who sat at their head, and who had uttered the exclamation recorded, but though he seemed far more interested than any of his companions, he sat like a statue after that one exclamation, looking at the building with a fixed stare.

"You are right, Maxwell; we have come too late."

The speaker sat just behind the guide and wore the dress of a Texan major. He was the commander of the troops.

Maxwell, the guide, seemed aroused to new life by this remark, for suddenly throwing off his stupefaction, he plunged his spurs into the sides of his horse, and spoke one word:

"Follow!"

And with this terse command, he dashed madly toward the building, followed by the other men. The latter glanced at each other significantly as they rode.

"Poor Maxwell is hit hard," said one.

"No wonder. He an' Luke Brastow were bosom friends an' Nate is a man who never does things by halves. Ef he likes a man, he likes him a good deal; ef he hates, woe be to his enemy!"

"It may not be so bad, after all," added another. "Brastow may have escaped, or may be a prisoner."

"We shall soon see."

The words were spoken as the command reached the building. It had once been a stout structure of its kind, but it had been abandoned for some time and must have made a poor fort for the handful of Texans who had taken refuge there from the Mexicans.

Maxwell, followed by his companions, had reached the gateway, and the former slid from his horse and entered.

An appalling sight met his gaze.

No living person was visible, but upon the floor were dead men, and all wore the dress of Texas Rangers.

They were all that were left of the late defenders!

The would-be rescuers gazed at them silently and almost without motion, but the eyes of Nathan Maxwell flashed eagerly about the place. He seemed looking for some one he did not see.

The building was divided into two rooms, and the guide strode through the doorway to the inner one.

He had no sooner crossed the threshold than he uttered a hoarse cry and his comrades hastily followed. A sight even more horrible than the first awaited them.

From the roof, five men, all Texans, swung slowly to and fro from the ends of lassoes.

Upon one of the unfortunate, the gaze of Nathan Maxwell had become fixed, and with a few long strides he pressed to his side. Then, with one sweep of his knife he cut the lasso and caught the body as it fell.

The Rangers stood in silence as they saw him bend over the cold clay. Dead beyond

recall the man surely was, but Maxwell laid his hand over the pulseless heart before he gave up all hope.

His comrades were cutting down the other hanged men, and though they spoke few words, their flashing eyes and compressed lips were eloquent in themselves. They laid the poor fellows side by side, but they could do no more for them, and then, as one man, they turned toward Maxwell.

He still knelt beside the corpse, and his eyes were fixed with strange intentness upon the white face.

The Rangers looked on in a species of awe. Nathan Maxwell and Luke Brastow had been friends of an extraordinary type. For years they had hunted, scouted, slept and lived together, and the tie which had bound them had been of a remarkable nature.

Now, he who survived knelt on the bare flagging and stared at the face of his dead friend with white wild eyes and haggard face.

Silence reigned in the place for several moments, for much as all the men felt their loss—for all these murdered Rangers had been their comrades-in-arms—they knew that Maxwell was the keenest sufferer; but the major at last advanced and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"We cannot help them now," he kindly said.

Maxwell raised his head and looked at his superior with glassy eyes:

"Dead! dead!" he hoarsely muttered.

"They died like men."

"Ay, but how were they killed? Was this deed done as one enemy should do to another?"

The hot blood surged back into the guide's face, and an ominous look crept into his eyes.

"It was horribly done," answered the major.

"It was fiendishly done."

"We are come too late for relief, but it may not be too late for vengeance. Let us lose no time, but bury our dead and pursue their murderers."

A look of fury crossed Maxwell's face, and, arising, he tore down the lasso by which Brastow had been hanged.

Then his companions looked in astonishment as he coiled the lasso and drew it again and again through the pool of blood under Brastow's body until it was saturated, red and slippery.

The Texans watched in amazement. The act seemed like that of a madman, but there was that in his manner which dispelled the idea.

He held the scarlet thing aloft and spoke

in a manner full of a fixed and relentless purpose:

"Comrades!" he huskily said, "behold this lasso! It is the same by which Luke Brastow was hanged, and it is red with his blood. He was basely murdered, but he leaves behind one who will avenge his death. Hear me, Texans, when I swear that earth nor sea shall hide the assassin from my arm! I will follow him though it be for years, and, when he is found, this same lasso shall end his life. With this blood upon it, I will strangle him though he be the President of Mexico!"

His voice grew clearer as he proceeded, and at the end rung out like a voice of fate. His manner, too, was fixed as the peaks of Cerro Gordo.

A subdued cheer went up from the Rangers. Every man there sympathized with Maxwell, every one was eager to strike a blow at the murderer.

"Vengeance!" the bold men shouted, and their leader removed his hat and added his voice to theirs.

"Vengeance shall be yours, and right speedily," he said. "Come, let us bury the dead, and then on to seek the enemy!"

Nathan Maxwell went outside and hung the crimsoned lasso in the sun, where it would dry, and then he joined his companions.

Not much time was required to inter the dead. The Mexicans had taken away their own slain, so that when the Texans had been carried from the building it was deserted except for the signs of the massacre—the broken gate, the breached walls and the dark stains upon the floor.

One long, deep grave was made and the bodies laid in a row, Luke Brastow at the head, and then the earth was replaced and everything done to make the burial seem civilized.

Maxwell did his part, but he did not once speak, and his terrible calmness touched the Rangers.

"He lives only for vengeance now," said one.

"He will not live to obtain it unless it comes quickly. His brain is giving way under the shock, and you may look to see him become a madman."

"He is made of sterner stuff," added a third. "Just now he looks bad enough, but he will rally, and then woe to his enemies."

Some of them glanced at the red lasso, fast drying in the sun, and, hardened men that they were, they shuddered at the thought of carrying such a thing.

But Nathan Maxwell, when their work was done, calmly secured it, and, when they

started on the trail, it hung coiled from his saddle pommel.

And the avengers swept away on the murderers' track with him at their head. The search for retribution was begun.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF VENGEANCE.

AFTER finishing their work, the Mexicans rode away in a westerly direction, and the trail soon showed that they had gone at so moderate a pace that hope sprung up in the Texans' breasts that they might be overtaken.

Unless their loss in the engagement with the murdered men had been greater than seemed probable, they still outnumbered the avengers, but not a thought was given to that fact. The latter were not men to count odds in such a case.

The discovery of the situation at the *casa* had been made in this way: The handful of Texans, with Maxwell and Brastow as members, had gone out on a scout with Nathan as guide. He was reconnoitering some distance ahead when the detachment was come upon and forced to seek shelter in the adobe dwelling, and when he discovered their peril he had gone at once for aid, with the result already told.

The prospect of overtaking the murderers acted like magic on the spirits of the pursuers, and they urged forward their horses as fast as the character of the way would admit. At times the trees and underbrush were so thick that they could only advance at a walk, but when the way was more open they broke into a gallop.

In the band was one man whom the major kept beside him, for his knowledge of the country was superior to that of any other there.

Young Edwin Talbot was a Kentuckian by birth, but he had always led a roving life, and the two years previous to the opening of the war had been passed by him within a circle of fifty miles about the very ground they were now traversing. With the opening of hostilities, he had at once enlisted in the Texan ranks, and his acquaintanceship with the hostile country had more than once served his cause well.

Major Palmer had frequently offered him a position as his special scout and spy, but he had declined the invitation. Circumstances had led some of his associates to doubt his good faith, but the major believed in and trusted him in spite of all.

Now, as usual, he was called to the front, and those who doubted him looked with troubled faces as they saw Palmer taking counsel of him as they rode along.

"I don't like the looks of it," said a Texan whose name was Nelson. "We are in a dangerous locality and few in number, and it would be very easy for him to lead us into a trap."

"As long as we folly ther trail o' the Greasers, I don't see es it makes any difference whether he rides at the front or the rear," observed the man beside him.

"I know you have a soft side for Young Kentuck, Jack Plunkett, but one traitor in a band may do a good deal of mischief."

"How you kin make Ed Talbot out a traitor I don't see. Ain't he allays fit as well as any on us when in a skrimmage?"

"I won't deny that, but you know there have been suspicious things about him. He ain't always around as he should be, and more than one of the boys have suspected him."

"Wrongfully, Abe Nelson, I sart'inly believe. The lad has got a good, honist face, an' I rayther take ter him."

The subject of their conversation certainly did have an honest-looking face, and it was one full of resolution which, if rightly directed, would prove a tower of strength to the cause in which he engaged. As he rode beside the major, he looked like anything but a traitor, but there are times when it is not wise to trust a man implicitly if appearances are against him.

"We are gaining rapidly on the dogs," said the major, looking keenly at the trail.

"They are carrying their dead," said Talbot briefly.

"What is their purpose in that?"

"Probably they have some particular locality selected as a place of burial, but it can not be far away. They will not make a great journey under the circumstances, and all this is in our favor."

"If they pause, we are liable to come upon them at any time."

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any danger of running into an ambush?"

"I think not. Probably they have no idea that we are near, and they will not dream of such speedy retribution."

"You say our course is taking us toward the denser forest?"

"Yes, sir. There are no villages in this direction for miles, and if we keep straight on we shall soon reach a chaparral which covers many acres. It is not at all likely the Mexicans will go there, for it is a place little frequented by white men. There are some few Indians who make their abiding-place there, and rumor has it that there are ruins of ancient dwellings in the interior, but the place is almost impenetrable, and I have never explored it."

Ah! Maxwell has paused. What is it now?"

The guide had halted and was waiting for his companions to join him. When they did, he addressed Talbot in a terse, metallic way:

"The Rio del Aguila is near at hand, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered the Kentuckian.

"It is a hard river to cross. Won't they be likely to turn south there?"

"Not that I can see. There is a ford dead ahead, and if they wish to cross, there is nothing to prevent."

"That alters the case. We will go on."

"Wait," said Talbot.

"Well?"

"It occurs to me that they may stop to inter their dead at the river-bank. If they are anxious to avoid labor, it would be just the place."

"How far away is it?" asked the major.

"A mile or so."

"Then you and Maxwell had better ride well ahead and see that we do not run into an ambush. If you find the Greasers, return at once to me."

Maxwell answered quickly and the scouts rode away at a gallop. Talbot looked from the red lasso on his companion's saddle to his fixed face.

"This has been a sad day," he kindly said.

"The end is not yet," the man somberly replied.

"I trust we shall be able to avenge our comrades."

"I cannot answer for you, but I will have satisfaction if I follow the assassins to the Pacific. It was no idle boast I made. This lasso has a mission to perform, and I will not rest until the blood of Luke Brastow is avenged."

The life-hunter spoke with terrible earnestness, but Talbot knew his cause was just and could not reproach him.

"You will not be alone in your work," he said.

Maxwell fixed a keen gaze upon him.

"There are those who doubt your loyalty, Edwin Talbot," he said, "but I cannot believe you friendly to those inhuman wretches."

"I know I have been suspected," said the other, with some embarrassment, "but I am heart and hand with the Texans. I have lived among the Mexicans, but I have no love for them."

"I believe you," was the terse reply.

They galloped on until, knowing they were fast nearing the river, Talbot advised greater caution, and they rode on at a more moderate pace.

Beside the river, some three-score horses

were collected in a group, and just beyond them as many men were engaged in some labor which a chance observer might at first glance have thought a mere agricultural occupation.

The scouts, however, were not deceived; it was the Mexican band interring their dead on the river-bank.

Maxwell's eyes flashed with sudden fire.

"We have them now," he said, eagerly,

"Ride back and hasten on our force. I will remain to watch them."

The Texan hesitated. He remembered the doubts many men had of Talbot's good faith. If he was of traitorous inclinations, he could warn and save the Mexicans while the avengers were coming up.

"My horse is exhausted; you had better go," he awkwardly said.

Talbot's face flushed, for he understood the silent accusation, but with a simple reply he wheeled his horse and galloped away.

Maxwell backed his horse into the bushes, where he would not by any mischance be seen, and silently watched the marked band.

They numbered at least sixty men, but there were more horses and he knew the victims of the *casa* tragedy had fought well for their lives. Indeed, there were many silent bodies by the river bank, but a long trench had been hollowed and all was ready for the disposal of the remains.

The face of the life-hunter was terrible in its expression as he watched them. He had never been a vindictive man, but all he had loved had gone from him by the agency of these men, not in fair battle, but in the teeth of the mercy a truly brave man shows his vanquished foe, and it is no wonder the blood of Nathan Maxwell burned at fever pitch.

He lifted the red lasso from his saddle and looked at it with a strange intentness. The blood of his dead friend had colored it crimson, and undoubtedly he was repeating his vow.

The sound of hoof-strokes aroused him and he looked around to see the Texans advancing. He motioned them on and they silently gathered about him.

"They are there," he said, pointing to the river.

"And in our grasp," said Major Palmer, with subdued excitement. "They do not suspect that we are near, and we will deal them a deadly blow."

"Let us lose no time," said Maxwell.

Palmer looked over his hardy band and bade every man prepare for a dash. They answered by looking to their weapons and a grim fire of resolution settled on their faces. Then the major gave the word and they broke cover and started for the enemy.

The green sward gave forth no sound of hoof-strokes, but the distance was short and the Mexicans could not long remain unconscious. They looked up from their work and saw the avengers sweeping down upon them.

In an instant the alarm was sounded and work suspended. The enemy realized their danger and made a rush for their horses, but no time was given them for elaborate preparation. The Texans had not far to go, and before half the Greasers were in the saddle the shock came.

Palmer realized the importance of getting in the first blow, and, shrewdly calculating the time, he gave the word to fire just before the collision came.

Then a terrible volley swept the close ranks of the Mexicans, doing fearful execution, and, before the result could hardly be seen, the foremost of the Texans were among their enemies.

What followed could scarcely be called a fight. The Mexicans were demoralized at the first and taken at a great disadvantage. The majority of them were separated from their horses, and those who had rashness enough to stand their ground were obliged to meet on foot a mounted foe in every way better prepared for the struggle.

Many of the pan-stricken wretches ran away and others tried to, but the avengers galloped to and fro, striking with their sabers wherever they could find one of the hated enemy.

CHAPTER III.

WANTED, A NAME.

In this unequal fight, there was one man who raged like a tiger, and who seemed to unite in himself the destructive powers of a dozen men. He galloped madly about, and his saber was wielded until the steel was red from end to end, and a gory trail marked the way he had traveled.

This man was Maxwell, and in his thirst for vengeance he had done great mischief to the enemy.

When, at last he could find no more opponent, he paused and looked at his companions who had been watching him as people will watch one they think mad.

"The Mexicans are all slain, Nathan," the major soothingly said.

The man brushed his hand across his eyes. He had been temporarily insane during the affray, but he now saw only dead Mexicans about him.

"Have none escaped?" he hoarsely demanded.

"A dozen or more swam the river," said Edwin Talbot, turning from the scene of slaughter with a shudder.

"Let us pursue," said Maxwell, hotly.

"Wait," ordered the major. "Let me first see what we have here. Some of these men still breathe."

He walked toward a man who had attracted his attention, but the fellow instantly sprung to his feet and attempted to flee. Unluckily for him, he was in the midst of his enemies, and, before he had taken many paces, an intercepting foot tripped him and he was seized before he could arise.

He then drew his dagger, but Jack Plunkett struck up his arm with a force which sent the weapon flying full twenty feet.

"Go slow, you 'tarnal Greaser!" snapped the scout Texan. "I'll knock your head ag'in' your heels ef you don't. Consider yonrself a prisoner o' war and be decent."

The captive, who was a small, very dark Mexican of middle age, stood still, but the scowl on his low brow and the unsubdued flash of his eyes told that he was far from frightened. He was like a caged panther.

Major Palmer pushed forward to the man's side.

"Senor Mexican," he blandly said, "you are our prisoner, and we have the power to do with you as we choose, but we are merciful men and have no desire to do you violence. If you will answer the questions I shall present to your notice, you shall be well treated."

"Are you the father confessor?" asked the prisoner with an undisguised sneer.

"What do you mean?" asked Palmer, curtly.

"My question was plain enough."

"And so, by Jove, shall my answer be," was the Texan's quick retort. "In this case, Sir Greaser, I *am* the father confessor, and you shall answer what I ask."

"What would you know?"

"You were one of that gang. Why didn't you retreat with what escaped?"

"One of your men struck too heavily," and the fellow grimaced as he rubbed his hand across his head.

"Who led your gang?"

"To what gang do you refer, senor?"

"To the one which is chiefly represented there," retorted Palmer, pointing to the Mexican dead.

"I do not know, senor."

"You lie, sir! The idea that a soldier does not know the name of his leader!"

"Pardon, senor, but I am only a new soldier. I know very few of my comrades, senor."

Jack Plunkett interpolated an unbelieving grunt.

"What is your own name?"

"Sebastian Donatez, senor."

"That is a lie!" interrupted Edwin Talbot. "He is named Vasco Mora. I've seen him before."

The prisoner flashed a threatening glance at the Kentuckian.

"Look you, fellow!" cried Palmer angrily, "you are dealing with those who will bear no subterfuge. Tell me the name of your leader."

"I know it not," was the sullen reply.

"You do, and, by my life, you shall tell. Once more, who is your captain?"

"Senor, I have said that I knew it not. I do not lie, and I can say no more."

"You can, and shall," declared the Texan. "Here, men, who has a lasso? We will give this hound a lesson."

Some one pushed into the center of the group, and the men saw Nathan Maxwell standing with the red lasso in his hand. His lips were compressed, and as he held out the fatal coil, he spoke in an intense voice:

"Here is the article!"

"Good!" said the major, quickly. "It is fitting that this lasso, which is red with the blood of Luke Brastow, should bring his assassins to terms. Convey the dog to yonder trees."

The prisoner was dragged toward the edge of the forest. He struggled at first, but the rough usage of the Texans caused him to desist, and he stood sullenly under the tree selected for the purpose.

The lasso was quickly noosed about his neck, one end was thrown over a limb and seized by the frowning men, and the wretch stood on precarious footing.

"Now, Vasco Mora," cried Palmer, "you must speak or die. Take your choice!"

"I protest against this outrage," and the Mexican's eyes flashed with fury.

"Will you speak?" implacably asked Palmer.

Mora uttered two or three Spanish oaths and then grew more thoughtful and calm.

"What if I tell all?" he asked.

"In that case, the whole of Mexico is before you, and free, so far as we are concerned. You can go where you choose, providing you tell all about the massacre."

The prisoner was conquered. He had tried the mettle of his captors, and, knowing his life was at stake, he decided to save that article by making a clean breast of everything, which he promptly did under Palmer's questioning.

The leader of the Mexicans proved to be a noted guerrilla, named Crispe Ribera, and those who had long known him for his deeds of rapine along the border, were not at all surprised to learn that it was upon his head that lay the blame of the *casa* tragedy.

Mora, having been set in motion, talked

freely, and in a voice suspiciously tinged with exultation, told how, when the *casa* had been stormed and taken, all the Texans had been put to death by Ribera's order, adding that the mistaken idea that there was no danger of pursuit, had led the Mexicans to loiter so fatally in their retreat.

CHAPTER IV.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

THE Texans had listened to Mora's narrative of the massacre with compressed lips and scowling faces. It was not enough that three-fourths of the murderers lay dead before them; they longed to get their hands upon the others, to make them suffer as the Texan martyrs had suffered.

Edwin Talbot stood near Maxwell during the recital, and he saw that every limb of the stout borderman was shaking. It was indeed a tale of horror, and it was a wonder that the avenger, in his state of mind, could maintain any degree of calmness.

His face worked convulsively, and Talbot expected to see him spring upon Mora and throttle him, but the Texan kept the truce sacredly.

When Major Palmer had heard all, he made no comment, but, looking at his men, simply said:

"Remove the rope."

Maxwell stepped quickly forward and cast off the noose; then, holding it before the eyes of the prisoner, said, while a terrible look crossed his set face:

"Mexican, do you see this lasso?"

"Yes," was the sullen reply.

"The stain you see upon it is the life blood of one of the victims of the *casa* fight. You did your part in that work, Vasco Mora, and some day I will strangle you with this same lasso."

Mora did not answer—he dared not—and Maxwell, having secured the red lasso, fell back and left the others to end the work.

"Prisoner," said Major Palmer, sternly, "you have been promised your freedom for what you have told, and though you richly deserve death, the promise shall be sacredly kept. Turn your face toward the east and begone, but if we ever see you again, you shall be shot at sight, or hung if caught. Go!"

Mora was full of venom and brute courage, but he dared not trifle with such men as his foes. He gladly turned from the camp, plunged into the bushes, and was gone.

"To the saddle!" ordered Palmer, sharply, as the wretch disappeared. "Our quarry went on foot and cannot long evade us. Ford the river!"

There was a rush for the horses, each Ranger captured one or more of the Mexi-

cans' steeds, and then the band plunged into the river.

"If we ever get out of this," said the major, looking at the captured horses, "our new horseflesh will not come amiss."

"We must get out of it speedily," answered Talbot. "That Mora is full of mischief, and in a few hours he will have two hundred guerrillas on our trail."

Nelson looked at him sharply. He remembered that the Kentuckian had secretly whispered to Mora, and to his suspicious mind it looked as though the whisper may have meant volumes.

The river was soon forded, and, the way being favorable, they struck the trail of the escaped Mexicans and followed at a sharp pace. If the fugitives kept together, as they had started, they would soon be run down if no new foe appeared to oppose the avengers.

Maxwell rode near the van, as usual, his face strangely white, his lips compressed, and upon his saddle-pommel still hung the red lasso.

The way was sufficiently open for the horsemen to proceed at a gallop, and only that they were incumbered by the extra horses, very good progress would have been made. Maxwell suggested that a dozen men be left in charge of the animals, but Palmer would not hear to dividing his small force.

"What is ahead of us now?" he asked of Talbot.

"A series of haciendas, and, I suspect from the course of the fugitives, they are making for one of them. They know, of course, that they will be pursued, and it behooves them to gain friends and cover."

"If they get inside a *casa*, our work will not be easy," said the major, thoughtfully.

"Very true, for they number a dozen, and they will rally the peons about them," declared the Kentuckian.

"I hate to go back unsuccessful."

"We must not," interrupted Maxwell, sharply. "How can you harbor such a thought until our dead are avenged, sir?"

"You wrong me," protested the officer, kindly. "I am as eager for vengeance as any here, but I must not sacrifice this devoted band."

"As for me, I will never rest until this lasso has been wound about the neck of Crispo Ribera. I have sworn it!"

Palmer looked significantly at Talbot and touched his forehead, but at that moment the band swept into an open field and the conversation ceased as they saw a broad hacienda with the usual style of Mexican house, or *casa*, in the center.

At the further side of the field, cattle and horses were seen grazing, but no human being was visible.

"Our quarry is there," said Talbot, pointing to the house. "They have found friends, and, even in so short a time, the peons have been called in and the *casa* put in order for defense."

Palmer looked thoughtfully at the dwelling. He was not a boastful man, and, though he purposed hurling his men upon the place in a determined assault, its stout appearance made him rather uncertain as to the result.

He gazed so long that Maxwell grew impatient.

"Time is precious, major," said the avenger.

"We will ride to the gate and see who is within," said the officer, arousing. "Follow me."

They crossed the field at a smart trot and rode unopposed to the gate. No sign had yet been seen of human beings, but a sharp pounding at the portal soon brought an answer.

It came from above, and, looking upward, they saw a man standing on the top of the wall. He was a Mexican, and his appearance was somewhat impressive. He was plainly of noble blood, and his rich dress, proud bearing and long, white hair gave him a marked appearance.

"What means this pounding?" he curtly demanded on meeting Palmer's gaze.

"Pardon our impatience, *senor*," explained the Texan, politely, "but we are in haste. We have not come as your enemies, but for information. We are seeking men who we fear have taken refuge here, and I wish to know if you have seen them."

"To whom do you refer?" was the terse question.

"To the guerrilla, Ribera, and his men."

"Captain Crispo Ribera is within this *casa*," the *hidalgo* calmly answered.

"Not of your free will, I trust, *senor*."

"And why not?"

"Because he is not one whom you should shelter."

"And why should I not shelter a soldier of Mexico?"

"You should be justified in doing this, but Ribera is not a soldier. He is an outlaw, a guerrilla and a murderer. His own crimes have brought us to his heels, and he is deserving of no mercy."

"Is this why you set upon him like cowards when he was burying his dead, instead of attacking like a soldier and a man?" was the sarcastic retort.

"Crispo Ribera must expect an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Ask him how died the Texans in the lone *casa*! Brave men do not hang their prisoners!"

"They were Texans, and all Texans are dogs," declared the *haciendero*.

An angry murmur went up from the Rangers and there was an ominous clicking of rifle hammers, but a word from Palmer stayed the hands of his men.

The aged Mexican smiled coldly.

"Senor," said the major, earnestly, "let us talk like men. Ribera has basely murdered our comrades and we seek for vengeance. Surely, you will not shelter the outlaw from our hands?"

"He is a soldier of Mexico and I *shall* shelter him," was the steady reply.

"Then, by my life, we will tear down every stone of this house!" hotly cried the major.

"Begin at once," was the unmoved answer.

"Where is Ribera? Let me speak to him?"

"I am spokesman here. Captain Ribera hears every word you say, but you must talk to *me*!"

"Is he afraid to show his worthless head?"

"Speak not of the lion until he is dead. I tell you I am master of this *casa*, and I am Don Eduardo del Rio y Savannah."

CHAPTER V.

THE ATTACK.

PERHAPS the haciennero expected his imposing name to strike a chill to the hearts of the Texans, but they were made of stern material. Palmer was only calculating how he could best get at the guerrillas. If he could have secured them, he would have gone away from the *casa* without lifting a finger against the old don or his property, but trouble seemed inevitable.

"Senor," he continued, after a pause, "do you fully understand the circumstances of this case?"

"Captain Ribera has told me all."

"And you refuse to surrender him?"

"Yes, senor."

"In that case our quarrel becomes against you all, outlaw, man and master."

"I am listening, senor."

"Are you blind to the fact that two-score soldiers are at my back?"

"I care nothing for them. Fifteen soldiers and fifty peons are inside my gates, all well armed. On equal terms we could whip you easily, and, with the stout walls about us, we laugh at your rage."

Palmer was somewhat staggered, but he was not one to yield tamely. He knew it would be hard to storm the *casa* with such a force within, but it must be done or Ribera would escape their vengeance.

"Think once more, Don Eduardo. We have not come as your enemies, and we mean you no harm, but we must capture the

guerrillas. Think what harm we can do you if you force us to be destructive."

He pointed to the horses and cattle grazing on the surrounding fields, and Edwin Talbot thought he saw a shade of annoyance cross the old man's face, but the answer came promptly enough:

"A patriot never counts his herds."

"There is no patriotism in sheltering a ruffian like Ribera," Palmer said, in disgust.

"Well, senor, if your business with me is done, I will retire," said the haciennero.

"It is only begun, but if you are resolved to play the fool, you can go where he choose. I give you one more chance to surrender the outlaws, and if you refuse, every stick and stone of this infernal ranch shall come down!"

"Begin when you see fit. Adios, senors."

And with this bland farewell, Don Eduardo del Rio y Savannah disappeared from view.

The Texans looked disappointedly at each other, and then Jack Plunkett uttered a sniff of disapproval.

"I don't like our quarters, major. Them p'ison creeturs kin do us a deal o' harm ef we stay hyer an' they see fit. A deluge o' b'ilin' water, fur instance, would hit us plum-center, an' I don't hanker ter become a lobster."

"You are right, and we will fall back a little. Watch the walls, boys, and if you see a rifle with a head above it, get in the first shot for the glory of the Lone Star."

The Rangers retreated a hundred yards, and Palmer gathered his best men about him for consultation. How to get into the dwelling became the question, but ways and means seemed lacking. The gate could not be beaten down, nor the walls scaled without ladders, and Don Eduardo seemed well justified in making his boast.

What could be done? Time with them was precious, for they were in the enemies' country and a superior force might at any time arrive. What was to be done must be done quickly.

Maxwell stood and gnawed his lips until the blood seemed on the point of bursting through. His hated foe was within a few rods of him, but for the time he was safe from his vengeance, and the knowledge was maddening.

"What shall we do?"

Palmer asked the question, looking at Talbot and the owner of the red lasso, but they did not answer promptly.

"We cannot delay," continued the leader. "If we give them time to gain aid, they are saved and we may be annihilated."

"Charge on the *casa*!" said Maxwell, hotly.

"We have been under its walls, but we saw no way to get further," was Palmer's reminder.

Edwin Talbot looked thoughtfully at the live stock of the hacendero.

"Can we gain a point by using them?" he asked. "Don Eduardo was touched when you spoke of them; he is not enough of a Roman, despite his boast, to lose all selfishness."

"How can we use them?"

"Drive every horse and horned creature near to the *casa*, and then slaughter them one by one until the gates are opened and Ribera surrendered."

This project created a ripple among the Texans, and Talbot's doubters were somewhat staggered. The proposition was not one a traitor would naturally advance.

"Would it work?" questioned Palmer, half to himself.

Maxwell uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Before it could be done, half of Mexico would be howling at our heels. Our only hope is to storm the place," he declared.

"What is your plan for getting inside?" asked the Kentuckian quickly.

Maxwell hesitated, for he had no feasible plan.

"If we only had ladders," said Palmer, slowly.

"We kin get over that snag," averred Jack Plunkett. "Thar is plenty o' scrub-trees in the woods, an' with the limbs properly cut, it would be a poor creetur that couldn't scale the wall. They would be nigh about as good as ladders."

"Bravo!" responded Palmer; "why didn't we think of it before? Take a dozen men, Jack, and go for the scrubs."

The detachment galloped toward the trees, but the major saw by a glance at Talbot's face that he did not regard the plan very favorably. He was asked why he doubted.

"It may succeed," admitted the Kentuckian, "but I am free to confess I fear a failure. There is, of course, a strong force of peons inside, besides the guerrillas—Don Eduardo put the combined force at sixty-five—and they will use every effort to repel us. They will haul down our ladders, and, the moment our heads appear above the wall, they will become the target for bullet, or club, according as our enemies are armed."

"Of course," admitted Maxwell, impatiently, "but I trust we have no cowards here. We have dared too many dangers to turn pale at this one."

Talbot reddened at this imputation of cowardice, but the major did not give him a chance to answer.

"It will be a hard fight, undoubtedly, but

it looks to me like a choice between that and the abandoning of our work. What is the sentiment of our band?"

"Storm the house if it takes a score of men!" cried Nelson, and nearly all the Rangers added their voices to the cry.

Palmer looked pleased, but the suspicious eyes of the last speaker had seen that the Kentuckian remained silent, and, to him, it seemed proof of worse than timidity.

"Why do you oppose the plan, Mister Talbot?" he pointedly asked.

"I do not oppose it," said the other, calmly. "I merely said I feared it would not succeed. I make no further objection, and, since it is to be, you will not find me backward in the business."

"Of course not," added Palmer, hastily.

At this moment Jack and his companions were seen returning with the substitute ladders. They had cut down scraggly trees and lopped off the branches in a suitable way, and many of the Rangers were inclined to think this aid would take them straight into the *casa*; though the more thoughtful could not but see the undertaking would be a doubtful one.

As the band moved once more toward the house there was no sign of the defenders, but there could be no doubt but that they were watched.

They reached the wall unchallenged, and then with a quick rush surrounded the place, lifted the "ladders" against it, and Palmer's voice sounded the signal for the assault.

Every man was ready, and the Texans darted up with cat-like agility.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RESULT.

THE impromptu ladders had been well placed, and the Rangers went successfully up until their heads reached the top of the wall. Then, as they had expected, trouble began.

Like a flash the wall became lined with human beings, and it was soon proved that they were not friends. A dozen or more carbines were fired with deadly effect—the work of the guerrillas—but the greater part of the defenders were peons, and they had been armed with clubs, hatchets, etc.

The Texans were taken at a decided disadvantage. They stood on a precarious footing, and where they could make little resistance, while the besieged had every advantage. In some cases they seized the saplings and hurled them to the earth, while in others their clubs descended with terrible force on the heads and arms of the Rangers.

Ordinary men would have turned and fled

at once before such a reception, but the Texans were made of sterner stuff. They had come to conquer, and like tigers they endeavored to gain the wall.

Every one in the devoted band was a hard fighter. We might single out men like Maxwell, Plunkett and Palmer and say they fought well, but they did no more than the rest. All were resolved to pass the barrier; and, when men fell with the falling saplings, it was only to rush again to the attack.

Edwin Talbot, however, had said well when he expressed the opinion that the plan would not work; for, gallantly as the Rangers tried, they found the resistance more than they could subdue.

Some of them had fallen dead or stunned to the ground below, and few remained who had not received a blow on the head or arm of suggestive force. Plainly the assault would not succeed.

Major Palmer saw that the battle was going against his command, and that they were losing men without doing the enemy any damage, so he sounded the word for retreat.

They went slowly and systematically, for there was no chance that the Mexicans would make a sally. This would have pleased the Rangers well, but the gates were not opened.

Every one of the fallen men were borne away, and a later examination showed four men killed, two with broken arms, and at least a dozen with scalp wounds of more or less severity.

"This is a bad business," said Palmer, sadly.

"Why did you order us back?" asked Maxwell, hotly.

"Because it was madness to continue the assault," answered the major, unheeding the want of respect shown his office.

"I would rather have died there than to retreat."

"Would it have avenged our comrades if you had died?" was the calm answer.

"We would have gone over that wall sooner or later," persisted the avenger.

"It couldn't hev b'en did," said Jack Plunkett, "an' the major was right in leavin'."

"The end is not yet," said Palmer. "In an hour it will be dark, and a second attempt may succeed better than this."

"New ideas would come in handy now," added Jack.

"Were all of our boys saved?" asked the major. "Count our force."

This was easily done, but an investigation showed one man missing. Perhaps he had been left under the wall.

"No," said Nelson quickly, "there was nobody left. Perhaps the name of the ab-

sent man may give some of you an idea. Where is Mister Edwin Talbot?"

Those who heard the question looked about for the Kentuckian, but he was not to be seen.

"There is no use of looking," said Nelson, "for he ain't here. He is gone, and I'll bet my rifle he is inside the *casa*."

"Ef he is," said another man, "he has deserted."

"You have hit the case plum'-center," declared Nelson. "Talbot has gone to those he loves best. Of course it was very easy for him to crawl over the wall in the *melee*, when he had friends inside, and that is just what he has done."

"I don't believe it," said Jack Plunkett. "Ef he is inside, he is a prisoner."

"There is a chance for a difference of opinion."

"Go slow," advised the veteran. "We all know you hated him, Nelson, but I am his friend, an' the man who says Ed Talbot is a traitor, until it is proved, has got ter fight me."

The bold speech of the bordermen could not be misinterpreted, but Nelson, brave as he was, did not care to quarrel with the hardest fighter in the band.

Luckily, the major came to the rescue and calmed the disputants. He had regarded Edwin as a true man, and though appearances were decidedly against him he would regard him, as such until he was proven guilty.

In any case, there must be no quarreling among the men of the band.

Palmer proceeded to reduce the matter to a system. Guards were stationed at intervals along the edge of the hacienda to watch for the coming of possible reinforcements for the Mexicans, and the other men collected and proceeded to discuss ways and means of carrying out their purpose.

The shades of night were already falling, and after dark their movements would be concealed from the besieged, but victory was still likely to evade their grasp.

Maxwell stood apart from the others and leaned upon his rifle with a thoughtful look on his stern face. In all his wild life he had never been so anxious to accomplish a purpose and his fertile brain was busy.

During the lull in the battle, events of interest were transpiring inside the *casa*, and to that place we will conduct the reader.

When Nelson charged Edwin Talbot with treachery he did him a wrong, for it was the Kentuckian's zeal which placed him in his present misfortune.

At one time in the assault, when he was fighting with remarkable energy, he saw an open space in the line of his enemies and

succeeded in mounting to the top of the wall.

If he could have held the place for a moment it would have opened a clear road for the Texans, but, just as he struck down a guerrilla, a stout peon seized him by the leg, and after a brief struggle, both fell off the wall together and landed on the stone flagging of the court.

The fall was a hard one, and only that the peon struck undermost, Talbot's career might have ended there and there, and, as it was, he was stunned for a few moments.

When he regained consciousness several men were standing around him, one of whom was easily recognizable as Don Eduardo, while the second wore the dress of a Mexican officer, and was undoubtedly the noted Crispo Ribera.

"He still lives," said the hacendero, harshly. "Dash another bucket of water upon him and he will be all right."

"Hold!" cried the Kentuckian, quickly. "There is no reason why you should drown me. I am well enough."

He arose to a sitting position, and, as he saw the fighting along the wall, knew his comrades were still waging their useless fight.

There was little about the court or *casa* different from the average Mexican dwelling, and he fixed his regard upon Captain Ribera.

The noted guerrilla was not a remarkable-looking man. He had a muscular form and a face expressive of courage, but he was not a man to admire. He had been a vagabond and brigand all his life until his country pardoned him on condition that he would fight against the invader, and he looked more like a prize-fighter than a soldier.

"Well," said Don Eduardo, sarcastically, "do *you* comprise the force with which the Texans propose to subdue us?"

"I seem to be the only representative here," the Kentuckian replied, rather lugubriously.

"You are all that will come here."

Talbot did not answer.

"They still fight," said the hacendero, looking upward. "We may be wanted elsewhere, captain. What shall we do with our prisoner?"

Ribera shrugged his shoulders.

"Dead men tell no tales," he coldly answered.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTIVITY.

THE manner of the guerrilla was not calculated to please the prisoner, but Don Eduardo seemed not to have heard the reply. He turned a thoughtful gaze from Talbot to the outlaw.

"Captain," he said, "we may have a future use for this fellow."

"How so?"

"We will hold him prisoner, and, by and by, we may be able to say to the Texans: 'Do this, or refrain from doing that, or your comrade dies.'"

"Very improbable," said Ribera.

"Still, it may happen, and it is well to be prepared for an emergency."

"Have your own way, senor, but if it was left to me, I would kill him at once."

"I know your merciless way already," said the Kentuckian, looking sternly at the outlaw.

"You may see more of it anon," retorted Ribera.

The hacendero called four of his peons and gave them some directions which were not audible to our hero, and then he and Ribera turned again to the wall.

The peons lifted Talbot to his feet and conducted him across the court. He knew the folly of resistance and went with them without a word.

They crossed the court and entered the *casa* proper, where the prisoner was at once conducted to a room which had little likeness to a dungeon, but that it was to be his prison was soon proved.

One of the peons went away, and the others proceeded to bind his hands with a stout cord. He made no complaint, knowing the uselessness of a remonstrance, but a faint smile hovered for a moment on his face at what he thought the extreme caution of the slaves.

Their motive was soon explained, however.

The absent peon returned, and with him came three ladies, or, perhaps we might better say, two ladies and one female peon.

He looked carefully at the trio. The peon woman was of middle age and as strong as a man, while in her coarse face there was little to give birth to hope.

The first of the two ladies was one who might have been the wife or sister of Don Eduardo. She had passed her prime, and her thin face had a sour, vixenish look, if Talbot read aright.

The second was young and handsome, but she retreated so quickly to the cover of a heavy window-curtain, that he could tell no more.

The Kentuckian was still standing, but the elderly lady advanced at once and spoke curtly in her native tongue.

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"Yes, senorita," he promptly answered.

"Very well. You will take yonder seat."

She pointed to a chair at the second window, and he promptly accepted it.

"Thanks, senorita," he then said. "I have a fancy for comfort, and it is very kind in you."

"My brother, Don Eduardo del Rio y Savannah, has so ordered," she replied, coldly.

"It makes my captivity almost a pleasure,"

She did not answer, and Talbot looked still more critically at his companions. There was little of mercy in the elder woman's face, while the peon, sitting bolt upright in her chair, looked as formidable as a man.

He glanced toward the second window, but there was nothing to be seen except a fine form, a profusion of ebony hair and a white hand holding the curtain. Still, the Kentuckian was sure she was a beauty, and he believed her to be the daughter of the hacendero.

Remembering that his friends were fighting outside, or had been, he listened, but no sounds of strife were to be heard, and he correctly judged that the Texans had been driven away.

How severely they had been defeated he had no means of knowing, but he hoped for the best, and began to calculate the chances of another attack. He knew they would not give up tamely, and, unless reinforcements came for the Mexicans, they would undoubtedly show their teeth again before morning.

He was not foolish enough to appeal to his jailers. The elderly lady's face was one which indicated a cold, unsympathetic nature, and as he was an invader, she undoubtedly cherished about the same feelings for him as had been expressed by Captain Ribera.

An hour passed and night had settled over the hacienda. Talbot parted the window-curtains, but could see only darkness, and not a sound was audible. Once or twice he had tried to converse with his chief jailer, as he regarded Don Eduardo's sister, but her curt replies soon ended conversation, and he almost wished for something to break the monotony of the hour.

Something came at last in the shape of the hacendero, who walked firmly in, made a quick survey of the room and then walked toward Talbot and his watcher.

"Is all well, Sister Costenza?" he asked.

"All is well, brother," was the grave reply.

"I trust you have not found your captivity painful, senor," continued the hacendero, looking at Edwin.

"Quite the contrary, Don Eduardo," answered the Kentuckian, who could see no sense in sulking.

"We might have made it far worse, for

there are dungeons under the *casa*, but Mexicans are humane."

Talbot bowed low. He remembered the old don's advice that he be saved as a hostage against a time of possible danger, and correctly judged why he was so easily used, but he answered in the old vein:

"A million thanks, senor," he said.

"I suppose you are anxious to know the end of the assault?"

"I suppose the Texans were beaten?"

"They were, and with severe loss. We did not lose a man. They are still hovering near the house, but I do not anticipate another attack."

Talbot remained silent.

"They are courting destruction by remaining here," added the hacendero.

"It is the life of a soldier."

"If they should succeed in storming the *casa*, what would they do here?" asked Don Eduardo, looking keenly at the prisoner.

"If Ribera and his men had been surrendered at the beginning, not a stick or stone of your *casa* would have been damaged."

"And what now?"

"Very likely, senor, their work would be gauged by the lives their conquest cost them."

"In other words, it is probable they would seek revenge on me?"

"Such is the way of men, but their leader is merciful. One thing is sure, whatever happens, your women and children are safe. Texans do not war on them."

Del Rio remained silent for some time, evidently in deep thought, but there was nothing to indicate that he repented his course or wished to change it.

"At any rate, there is little to fear from them," he at length said.

"I would advise you, in the name of mercy, to treat once more with them before it is too late, Don Eduardo. If you will release me and expel the guerrillas from your walls, I promise you the Texans will at once go their way and leave you unmolested."

"*Curamba!* You must think me a poltroon, senor. You misjudge me. I am a Mexican, and, by the virgin, Captain Ribera shall never suffer while my walls remain secure."

"Have your own way," said Talbot, curtly.

Don Eduardo looked at him fixedly for some time, and then he turned to Costenza and asked her to step outside the room.

The lady arose, and with a word of warning to the peon woman, followed the hacendero beyond the Kentuckian's sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

TALBOT saw the brother and sister depart

without great interest. Their consultation might concern him, but, as there was no evidence that Don Eduardo was wavering, he saw no ground for hope.

The peon woman, who maintained her stiff position, was not an agreeable object to look at, and the Kentuckian glanced curiously at the silent figure in the corner of the curtains.

The latter had not moved while the hacien-dero was present, and, so far as Talbot knew, she might be both deaf and dumb.

Suddenly, however, he was surprised to see her turn abruptly, brush aside the curtains and advance toward the second window.

A fitful lamp burned on a side-table, giving a scanty light, but even then the prisoner could see that besides the gift of youth, she possessed a fine form and handsome face.

There was something in the face, moreover, which seemed familiar, but handsome young women are common among Spaniards and the pure-blooded descendants.

Everything else, however, was lost to sight when he saw her swiftly advance to the peon woman and lay both hands upon her shoulders. The movement was accompanied by an eager look of features, though intermixed with one of resolution, and then the girl spoke in a melodious voice.

"Brigida, you will not interfere?" she softly said.

The woman looked at her, stoicism uppermost on her coarse face, but Edwin thought he saw a shadow of anxiety behind it.

"Senorita Berta, what would you do?" the peon asked.

"Never mind, Brigida, *querida*, but you will not interfere? Promise your Berta."

The fair creature clasped her arms around the woman's neck, and she perceptibly wavered.

"Your father may arrive, child," she expostulated.

"If it is so, so be it. Say nothing, Brigida, but be wise."

Then the senorita turned to Talbot, who was watching in silent wonder.

"Don Edwin," she hurriedly said, "have you forgotten me?"

The Kentuckian started. Somewhere in the past he had seen her face, but—

"Ha!" he cried, "I do remember! I have not forgotten the carriage accident on the mountain; I have not forgotten you, senorita."

He extended his hands, bound as they were; clasped her own and pressed them to his lips.

"You saved my life then, when the frightened steeds would have dashed me

over the cliff but for your aid," she quickly continued, "and a Del Rio never forgets. I asked you then to come to my father's hacienda. If you had done so, my father would have been your friend instead of your enemy to-day. Now, it is too late to change his course, but a daughter of my race was never ungrateful. You saved my life, Don Edwin, and, by the help of the Virgin, I will now save yours."

Her impetuosity was proof of her sincerity, but Talbot remembered the risk she would incur and began to remonstrate.

"Not a word, American," she interrupted. "Brigida, listen at the door and tell me when they return."

The grim old woman glided to the door and the maiden again spoke hurriedly:

"I say you shall be saved, but I cannot now tell the hour or the way. I have no one to aid me excepting my nurse, Brigida. Aunt Costenza would betray me if she knew I had spoken to you, and ruin all, but Brigida is true. Can you tell me how to get you free?"

"Cut my bonds and I can escape," said the Kentuckian. "But you forget yourself. You--"

"The court is full of peons and soldiers. The moment you dropped from the window you would be seen and again secured."

"I could fight my way through," began the Ranger; but Berta shook her head.

"Impossible!" she expostulated. "When you go, it must be by stealth. I must have time to think of a way. Do not despair Don Edwin, for I will save you."

"You will ruin yourself in trying."

"Ha! ha! Trust for once to a woman's wits, Don Edwin. I repeat, I will save you—"

"*Curamba!* they are returning, senorita!" cried the peon, quickly.

The words had scarcely passed her lips when Berta was back in her old place by the window, half concealed by the heavy curtains.

The door opened, and Costenza entered. Seemingly the scene had not changed since she went away. Each one of the trio was seated as before, and after a cold, roving glance, the austere lady returned to her former position, and Talbot breathed freer as he saw she suspected nothing.

Cool as he was, he felt his pulse beating quicker than usual, for the moment had been a critical one; if the suspicions of Costenza had been aroused, trouble would have come to more than him.

He kept his seat and looked steadily at vacancy, but his thoughts were busy. His meeting with Berta had been wholly unexpected. A year before, while roving among

the mountains, he had saved her from a peril brought about by a pair of fiery horses and an incompetent driver, but, though somewhat impressed by her fair face, he had declined her invitation to visit her father's home, and only remembered her Christian name—Berta.

Now he was surprised at meeting her, but if he had been a more selfish man he would have been pleased at the hope of aid from her hands. Talbot, however, was not one to look wholly to himself, and he feared that if the girl attempted to release him she would bring ruin upon herself.

While he was thus thinking, Donna Berta was equally busy. She had the ardent nature common to Spanish women, and a far truer and more grateful heart, and in some way she was resolved to rescue the gallant American.

Ever since the mountain adventure, his memory had lingered in her thoughts; she had cherished him as a knight of chivalry; and her feelings were such as would have surprised the cool-headed Kentuckian, could he have known them.

Product of the North that he was, love was with him a plant of slow growth, while to this child of the South it was the offspring of a day or an hour.

Talbot could hear the defenders in the court outside, and he knew they were watching for another attack, but he could not see how the Texans were to succeed, and he was not particularly hopeful.

Worse still, the chances were that if they continued near the *casa*, a second and superior force of Mexicans would soon appear, and their coming meant serious trouble if not ruin to the devoted band.

Talbot was of a philosophical nature, and though he did not relish his situation, he almost hoped the Rangers would beat a retreat. They had already done much to avenge the massacre, and the horses secured made valuable spoil, and prudence demanded an instant departure.

He thought of Maxwell, however, and felt sure that he would not abandon his trail of vengeance until the red lasso had performed its mission. Certainly, Crispo Ribera would not be safe while he lived.

While he was reflecting thus, Donna Berta slowly arose and glided toward her aunt. She whispered a few words in the austere lady's ears, and then left the apartment, while the elder senorita kept her place, and Brigida looked impassive as ever.

Talbot, however, could but think the act had a meaning. Perhaps he was foolishly full of notions, but he was one to observe and draw conclusions.

Ten minutes passed and the maiden return-

ed. She bore in her hands a silver waiter upon which were three glasses, each of which was filled with some liquid which might have been wine.

She handed one to Costenza, a second to the peon woman, and with the third she then retreated to the cover of the curtains; but the Ranger noticed that she had changed her position so that she could watch all in the apartment.

This done, the three women began to slowly sip the cherry-hued liquid.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WORK OF THE WINE

WHAT had thus far occurred would not, under ordinary circumstances, have been worthy of second thought, but, somehow, Talbot felt that the air was full of great events, and he was strangely nervous.

The women drank their wine, if wine it was, slowly, and he closely watched.

Costenza remained calm and severe of countenance, but he noticed that the eyes of Brigida frequently wandered to Berta, and they expressed a good deal.

He had at first thought the peon woman hideous and heartless, but her masculine face seemed far softer and kindlier than before. It was evident that she was devoted to Berta above all other human beings.

The wine was finished and Brigida set the empty glasses on the waiter, and placed the whole on the table.

Costenza yawned, crossed her hands over her rich dress and looked severely at vacancy.

For the time, all sounds outside had ceased and the silence was oppressive.

Costenza seemed to sleep.

Berta arose and glided to the spinister's side. She spoke her name and touched her on the arm, but there was neither answer nor movement.

Then Berta glided to the side of the Kentuckian.

"Don Edwin," she softly said, "you are on the road to freedom."

"There is no time to lose. Aunt Costenza must be conveyed to her apartment, and then you must assume the dress of a peon, enter the court and watch your chance to pass the wall."

"But you, senorita, what of you?"

"I do not understand, Don Edwin."

"They will punish, perhaps kill you, for aiding me to escape."

"Whatever occurs, I am satisfied," she answered.

Her gaze was turned away from him, but her tone and her manner revealed volumes.

The hot blood rushed to Talbot's face as he realized that this glorious creature loved him.

His feelings at that moment cannot be described. Gladness, sorrow, surprise, confusion—all assailed him and he remained dumb.

Brigida glided to their side and spoke in a troubled voice:

"What is done must be done quickly. There is danger in delay," she announced.

Even at that moment a shuffling step was heard outside and a look of alarm crossed the slave's face.

"Santa Maria! Some one comes!" she exclaimed.

The emergency cleared the wits of the Kentuckian. He raised the chair of the sleeping woman, carried it with its burden to the recess of the window and drew the curtains around it.

The movement concealed the spinster from view.

"Back to your chair!" Berta cried to the ranger.

A rap sounded at the door.

Talbot strode to his chair, drew the severed bonds about his wrists and sunk into his old position.

Berta swept her hand across her face, and then, as she opened the door was as calm as ever.

Captain Ribera stood in the passage, and those inside the room breathed freer as they saw he was alone. Don Eduardo's presence, just then, would have meant ruin, but the guerrilla might possibly be outwitted.

He stood in silence, his gaze roving around the room, but as Talbot marked the flush upon his face and a swaying of his powerful form, he was not slow in accounting for these facts.

The guerrilla was partially intoxicated.

"What is wanted?" Berta asked, with surprising calmness.

"Nothing in particular," replied Ribera, summoning all his wits to talk straightly. "I was passing and thought I would drop in."

He entered the room and looked dully at Talbot.

"The Texan is still here," he added.

"Where else should he be?" Berta tersely asked.

"Where's the old woman—I mean, where is Senorita Costenza?"

"My aunt is in her apartment," was the icy reply.

"So you are all alone with the terrible Texan? I'll sit down and help you watch him."

The ex-outlaw, who had for years made his bed in the caves of the mountains and the

thickets of the chaparral, settled himself into an easy-chair with a sigh of relief.

Talbot was annoyed and tempted to hurl himself upon the drunken wretch, but Berta surveyed the scene calmly.

"You look fatigued, captain," she said. "I will order refreshments."

"Pardon, senorita," said Ribera, quickly, "but I do not care for anything. I am very well as I am, and wine don't agree with me."

"A glass or two, with a bit of cake, will refresh you, captain," was the unmoved reply. "Brigida, bring some of our best. I will drink with you, Captain Ribera, and you ought to taste our wine."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE TOILS.

BRIGIDA promptly departed, while Ribera stroked his beard in a mixture of complacency and anxiety. He knew he ought not to drink more, but had not the Senorita Berta asked him, and had she not promised to drink with him?

The guerrilla was not a man of lofty ideas. If a woman swayed him, he was as ready to go wrong as right, and just then he was ready to do what Berta said—providing it did not concern Talbot. That was beyond the limit of his yielding.

All this the Kentuckian read, and he wondered what would be the result. He knew it was Berta's purpose to get Ribera fully intoxicated, but the situation was critical and Don Eduardo might arrive before the work was accomplished.

So the Kentuckian grew nervous and was half-inclined to set upon the ruffian and end the suspense; but the senorita seated herself before him and smiled upon him in a bewildering way.

Ribera brushed his hand frequently across his face. He felt confused, but supremely happy. The fool was in the toils and he knew it not.

Brigida returned with the refreshments, and with her own hands the senorita poured the red wine and passed the cake, while the guerrilla, who had intended to be prudent, lost all caution and drank freely.

"I must rejoin my braves," he said thickly, "but I hate to leave you alone with the invader."

"Do not leave," urged Berta. "I am sure all is well outside, and I shall be lonely without you."

"Your voice is like a flood of music," he gallantly said, "but a soldier should know no call except that of duty. Press me no further, Donna Berta, for I must go."

There was a dogged firmness in his manner, and the maiden thought perhaps it

would be as well to get rid of him as to attempt to carry out her previous idea on a man who seemed unaffected by liquor.

"Retain your seat, Brigida," she graciously said; "I will myself conduct Captain Ribera outside."

She placed her hand on his arm, but he remained looking at Talbot.

"Before I go," he said, "I must see that the bonds of the *Americano* are secure."

"They are quite secure," she said hurriedly. "There is no fear from them, captain. Come, let us go!"

She took a step toward the door, but Ribera had grown obstinate.

"I admire your lofty courage," he said, "but I cannot leave until I have made sure."

Berta was alarmed and perplexed, but Talbot saw that it would not be wise to thwart the guerrilla in his present mood. If he went away, it would be with a suspicion in his mind, and their safety demanded that he be overpowered and placed beyond mischief.

"You give me credit for supernatural powers, Captain Ribera," he interrupted, "but, I am pained to say, my bonds are lamentably strong. If you will loosen them a trifle, you will greatly oblige me."

He held out his hands, with the cords still upon them, and Berta, seeing that he had an idea, made no further objection. Ribera growled something about the "accursed invader" and advanced to his side.

Of course, for him to touch the cords meant sure discovery, and the Kentuckian braced himself for the encounter. He knew very well that the guerrilla would not loosen his bonds—as, indeed, they did not require—and he only awaited the proper moment to take matters in his own hands.

Ribera bent down to touch the cords, but at that instant, Talbot moved. Quick as a flash he threw one arm about the guerrilla's neck, while his other hand was clasped over his bearded mouth and nostrils.

Before Captain Crispo had time to realize the situation, he was lying flat on his back and the "invader" was kneeling on his breast. The mask was thrown off and Talbot was for a while master of the situation.

Berta whispered to Brigida, who hurried away, and then she turned to the two men who were scowling at each other with far different emotions. Talbot was cool, confident and active, while Ribera was confused, weak and stupid.

"Lie still!" said the victor, sharply. "If you behave well you shall not be harmed, but if you try to give an alarm, the consequences be on your own head."

The dismayed outlaw tried to speak and

say that he yielded, but Talbot's hand was over his mouth and only a hollow gurgle sounded.

The Kentuckian looked at the donna, but at that moment Brigida re-entered the apartment, bearing a quantity of cords.

"Keep your place, senor," she said, to Talbot. "I will bind him."

And then, without waiting for an answer, she proceeded to carry out her idea.

In a short time the guerrilla was bound and gagged, and then Berta pointed to the second window. He was dragged to the cover of the curtains and stowed away in the recess where he would not be seen unless by a close search.

Then the trio drew a little apart.

"You must delay no longer, Don Edwin," said the girl. "It is a wonder my father has not been here before now, and he is liable to come at any minute. You must at once assume the dress of a peon and make your escape."

"I am ready for the venture," Talbot promptly replied, "but what of you, senorita? What will your father say when he discovers what you have done?"

"Do not think of me, Don Edwin."

"I must and will think of you. It is cowardly for me to leave you to face such a peril alone."

His manly utterance plainly pleased the girl, for her fair face grew softer.

"I give you life for life, senor," she said.

"I know, and may all blessings be yours, but in saving me you have placed yourself in fresh peril and it is cowardly for me to leave you to face it. Donna Berta, there is no safety for you here. Will you leave with me and trust yourself to my care?"

CHAPTER XI.

A CRISIS IN EVENTS.

FIVE minutes before, Talbot had not the slightest idea of uttering such words, but as the chances of his escape seemed to increase, the full realization of what Donna Berta must encounter came to him, and he could see but one way to act.

A sudden light, which was like a flood of joy, brightened the girl's face, but it speedily faded. In her heart she loved the brave Ranger, and his proposal gave her great pleasure, but as she realized that it merely proceeded from his manliness of heart and not from responsive love, she turned aside from temptation.

"I thank you, Don Edwin, but it cannot be. Your band of Texans are in the field and a woman would be a burden upon you. My place is with my people and I must stay."

He pleaded his cause earnestly, but she

was firm. They spoke rapidly for several minutes, but, when the Kentuckian saw she could not be moved, he began once more to think of himself.

Brigida had quietly left the room and returned with the dress of a peon, and when this had been donned by the Ranger, his appearance was not such as to attract suspicion in the night-time.

It was arranged that Berta should remain where she was and Brigida guide him to the court, and the time for farewell had come.

Talbot was deeply moved. He realized all that the senorita had done and was daring for him, and he read very well the light in her splendid eyes. She loved him and he was going away, perhaps never to see her again. The thought gave him pain, and in that supreme moment he felt a new emotion and resolved that he would see her again if he had to swim seas of blood to accomplish it.

'Twas that time in a man's life, a time which comes to but few, and when even cool-headed men become methodically mad—perhaps over a passion which is not even love, and which they forget in their calmer moments—when a man feels an intensity of feeling and purpose which defies description.

What Edwin Talbot said he could not have told an hour later, but he poured his burning words and solemn vows into ears which eagerly listened, and in some way the farewell was said.

Brigida and the Ranger departed and Donna Berta was left alone with the prisoners by the window—alone, but not unhappy. The gallant Kentuckian, her hero, had promised to return to her if he lived, and in her warm heart there was not a doubt.

Meanwhile the peon woman had led our hero to a door which opened into the court. There, he was to depart from the last of his allies, and as he gave her his hand in farewell, he could not but remember how the last hour had changed his opinion of her.

Her face was coarse and masculine, and at first he had thought her cruel and merciless, but under the guiding hand of her beloved mistress, she had utterly reversed his judgment.

The door closed behind him and he looked keenly around. The night was dark and that immediate part of the court nearly deserted. Two or three peons glided past, like men on their beat, but if they saw Talbot, they gave no sign.

Time was precious, and he walked quickly to the wall. Once on the top he could easily drop to the prairie and then all would be well.

He was about to ascend when he heard a sound above, and, looking up, saw a man on the wall. He pressed against the stones and waited for him to move on, but, instead, he turned and dropped lightly beside the Kentuckian.

The latter had no suspicion that he was not a peon, and he nerved himself to carry out his part. A second glance, however, gave him great surprise, for he recognized the face and form of Nathan Maxwell.

The owner of the red lasso was on the track.

At the same moment the Texan saw the dark form beside him, and he was about to precipitate himself on what he thought a foe when Talbot spoke his name.

"Hold! Maxwell, don't you know me?"

"Is it you, Talbot?" he asked.

"It is, indeed, but how in the world did you scale the wall?"

"Easy enough. The Greasers were watching for a body of men, and they did not see the single one who crawled snake-like through the grass and then mounted the wall by means of one of the tree-ladders we left there some time ago."

"You were rash to come here alone, Maxwell. We are in a very hot bed of the Mexicans, and they are liable to find us at any moment. Let us go while we can."

"Do you advise me to retreat?"

"Your life depends on it."

"You seem to be safe here," quickly and suspiciously answered the Texan.

"I have just escaped from the house, and glad enough I shall be to feel the prairie-grass under my feet."

"Do you know why I have come here, young man?"

"No."

"I am going to open the gate and admit our men!" declared Maxwell.

"For your life, don't try!"

"And why not?"

"You will surely be discovered."

"I will run the risk."

Talbot was in a state amounting almost to agony. He knew that for the Texans to enter the place meant a renewal of the fight, and he had good cause to apprehend violence on the part of the band if they gained a chance. For the ruffianly guerrillas he cared nothing, but he feared for the women, if an entrance was gained.

His usage at the hands of Berta had changed the current of his feelings. He would have died to save her, and, even if the Texans remained true to their creed and lifted no hand against the weaker sex, he believed it would go hard with Don Eduardo. He owed nothing to the hacendero, but

Berta loved him and would mourn if harm was done him.

"Let us go away," he feverishly said. "We have done good work for our cause, and there is little more to be done here."

Maxwell glared furiously into his face.

"Ribera and his red-handed hounds are here!" he hissed.

"Leave them until another time. I fear for the haciendero and his household, if the Texans enter."

"I thought as much, but your fancy shall not save them. If I had my way, every person, male and female, should be served as they served Luke Brastow. Say no more, boy, I will open the gate."

"You shall not!" protested Talbot, grasping his arm.

Maxwell shook off his hold and showed his white teeth in a tigerish snarl.

"Beware!" he hissed. "I am not to be turned from my purpose, and there are those who already doubt your loyalty to the Lone Star."

He could not have struck a straighter blow. Sincere and loyal as Talbot was, the doubts of his comrades had always troubled him, and as Maxwell spoke he drew proudly back.

"Say no more," he answered. "Have your own way, but I wash my hands of this work."

"Come with me to the gate."

Side by side the pair stalked toward the gate. In that critical hour luck seemed to have utterly forsaken the Mexicans, for not a man appeared to bar their way.

The gate was reached, and with skillful hands the owner of the red lasso began to undo the fastenings.

Talbot stood by in silence, but he was in mental agony. Peril and death seemed very near to fair Berta then.

The last fastening gave way, and Maxwell pulled the gate ajar. The way was open to the Texans!

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXCITING DRAMA.

"THERE is no time to lose," said Maxwell, quickly. "Do you go at once to Major Palmer and tell him to make a dash for the gate."

It was an order Talbot dared not disobey. His reputation was at stake, and for him to be backward then would ineffaceably brand him a traitor. A true man values his honor above all things earthly, and for a time the memory of Bertha grew dim.

With a simple reassurance to Maxwell, he glided through the gate, and crouching low, hurried toward where the Ranger had said the band was to be found.

As he went he half-expected to receive a shot from the wall, but all remained silent. He would not have cared much at that moment if he had become a target for the guerrillas' rifles.

He reached the camp of the Texans, and a word was enough to announce him as a friend, while the simple announcement that the gate was open was enough to bring every man upon his feet.

Major Palmer became wide awake in an instant. He ordered an immediate advance, directing the Rangers to advance silently until discovered, and then make a dash.

Edwin Talbot had a duty to perform, and he placed himself beside his leader.

"Where have you been all this while?" Palmer asked.

The Kentuckian briefly related how he had been captured, held in imprisonment, and finally freed by the haciendero's daughter.

"What will you do when inside the walls?" he then asked.

"Kill every man who opposes us, and then wipe out the last of Ribera's men, if any survive," the major fiercely answered.

"And Don Eduardo?"

"Will be dealt with according as he behaves when we attack."

"There are women there, major."

"What of them?"

"They saved my life, and I would save them from harm," replied Talbot, unsteadily.

"Rest easy, sir, for we are Texans. You have been with me for a year, Edwin Talbot. Did you ever, in that time, know me to countenance war upon, or severity toward, one of their sex?"

"Never, major, never," was heartily answered, a great load lifting from his heart. "I confess I feared for them, but I was mad."

By this time they were too near the gate for conversation; indeed, it seemed a wonder that they had not already been discovered.

Palmer began to suspect a trap, and, of course, if there was one, Talbot was at the bottom of it; but he resolved to test the matter. Giving the word to his men, they made a rapid dash for the gate.

Only a few rods intervened between them and the goal, when a carbine was discharged on the wall—the tardy warning of a worthless sentry.

There was an instant hum of voices inside the gate, but, before much time had passed, the Rangers were at the opening. A hoarse shout sounded from Maxwell, proving that all was well, and then the gallant band went through with a rush.

Men were rushing to and fro in the court,

but there was nothing which looked like armed opposition. Plainly the enemy were taken at a decided disadvantage.

The greater part of the Texans paid their first attention to the court, and they found there peons who had been peacefully sleeping on the bare flagging, but scarcely one of them lifted a hand in opposition, and, by Palmer's order, they were treated with mercy.

Here and there a man was met who fought desperately, and when he was beaten down he was found to wear the uniform of Ribera's guerrillas. To such no pity was shown.

Edwin Talbot had at once made a rush for the inside of the *casa*. He wanted to be near Berta and save her from harm and a strange calmness had taken possession of his previous excitement.

He saw men follow at his heels, fellow Rangers, but he paid no heed to them. He rushed toward the room where he had last seen the senorita, and flung open the door.

The apartment was empty, or seemed to be. There was no sign of Berta.

He turned back into the corridor, but, by this time, those who had followed him had made a hasty search, and a cry arose from them.

"The *azotea*!" shouted the mad Rangers. "We shall find them there!"

Talbot caught at the idea and made a rush to be at the head. A huge guerrilla arose, however, from a recess, and, catching the Kentuckian, attempted to hurl him to the foot of the stairway.

They fell together, and Talbot was half-stunned for a moment, but recovering his footing, he saw the guerrilla flat upon the floor with Nathan Maxwell kneeling upon his breast. The former struggled in vain in the grasp of the life-hunter, and Talbot saw that he was deliberately *strangling him with the red lasso*!

The Kentuckian turned from the repulsive sight and bounded up the steps of the *azotea*!

A dozen females had instinctively retreated there, all peons except Donna Berta and the Texans, who were the most lawless of the whole band, had imprisoned them and were demanding kisses from mere mischief.

Talbot's blood boiled at this disregard of Major Palmer's orders, and as he saw Berta struggling in the arms of a stout scoundrel, he stepped forward and dealt him a blow which dashed him half-stunned against the parapet.

In a moment more the Kentuckian had drawn the really frightened senorita to one side where he could defend her.

"Have no further fear, dear lady," he said. "These ruffians shall only touch you by passing over my body."

"Oh! you will ruin yourself, Don Edwin!" she gasped.

"I will protect you or die!" he hotly answered.

The fallen man had regained his feet, and the Rangers, sobered by the quarrel, followed him as he strode toward the Kentuckian. They had not intended to harm the women, but a blow had been given, and, among them, such things were always accounted for.

"Ed Talbot!" hissed the man, "I'll have your life for that act!"

"Come on, and make no words about it!" retorted the hero, holding his saber in a vise-like grasp.

In a minute more the clash of steel would have sounded on the *azotea*, but at that moment a new voice was heard, and Major Palmer and a dozen men appeared on the scene.

"Hold there!" he commanded, as soon as he discovered the state of affairs in the dim light. "What quarrel is this?"

"Talbot has turned traitor and raised his hand against our own boys," answered one, quickly.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIGHT UNDER THE WALLS.

PALMER turned sharply upon the speaker.

"Where is your proof?" he demanded.

"It has been accumulating for weeks—"

"Then we will settle the matter anon. At present I do not see wherein Talbot is to blame."

At this moment a man bounded upon the *azotea* and stood breathless beside the major.

He was one of the guards set to watch for the coming of possible reinforcements, and his manner was enough to alarm the Texan.

"What now?" Palmer demanded.

"More Greasers are coming! They number at least a hundred, and are riding pell-mell toward the *casa*. They will be here in five minutes."

"Retreat is our watchword then," said the major, with surprising calmness. "Every man to his horse and all ride like fiends for safer soil!"

"Why not make a fortress of the house?" asked one man.

"And have a thousand men howling around us in twenty-four hours? No, sir, our only course is to retreat."

The men turned toward the stairway, but Palmer looked hesitatingly at Donna Berta.

"Senorita," he kindly said, "war knows little law and we must save ourselves. As much as I regret the necessity, you must go with us as a hostage, but I swear by my honor that you shall be well treated."

"Major, is there no way to avoid this?" asked the Kentuckian, in fresh alarm.

"None, sir, but you, yourself, shall be the lady's guard. Senorita, I trust you will be sensible and obey my wishes, and you have a soldier's word of honor that all shall be well."

Talbot was quick-witted, and he saw that there was no appeal from the verdict, while any further remonstrance on his part would lessen his influence with the major. He knew, too, that the latter would conscientiously keep his pledge.

So he spoke quickly to Berta, explaining the situation, and ending by reiterating the promise of fair treatment.

No more was needed. It was enough for Berta that she was to go in charge of the man she loved, and she would have followed him to the end of the world.

She promptly acquiesced in the plan, and the Rangers descended from the roof and into the court. Men were there to urge them to hasten. The guerrilla reinforcement was almost at hand and the moment a critical one.

Their horses had been brought to the gate and they hurriedly mounted.

Talbot managed to secure his own horse and see Berta well mounted, but at that moment there was a hoarse chorus of yells, and the Mexicans swept down upon them.

Major Palmer grasped the whole situation at a glance. He knew they must fight, and to fight when in retreat would place them at a decided disadvantage; while, with their superior weapons and matchless courage, they might, by a bold stand, repel the first rush of the guerrillas and gain a better start.

So his clear voice rung out in a decisive command, and at the word the Texans hurled themselves against the van of the Mexicans as valiantly as though the odds were not terribly against them.

Talbot had received directions to devote himself entirely to Donna Berta and the order was obeyed.

It was a moment of sore temptation to the Kentuckian. He did not like the idea of the maiden being a prisoner, and at that time he might have turned back and placed her safely in the *casa*. It seemed that there was little to lose by it, since so many of his comrades already believed him a traitor, but the recollection of Major Palmer's confidence in him was enough to prevent his rash deed.

Perhaps all might yet be well. Don Eduardo had been left unharmed inside the *casa*, his property had been respected, and matters might not end so badly after all.

The rush of the Rangers was almost resistless. Their rifles cracked with deadly effect, and then their sabers and pistols taught

a lesson of Texan bravery and skill. Even the superior numbers of the guerrillas could not enable them to withstand such an attack, and they began to give ground.

The hardest fighter among all the Texans was Nathan Maxwell; indeed, he seemed for the time to have become almost a score of men within one, and his fighting was terrific.

As he dashed to and fro, wielding his saber, his red lasso hung over his saddle, but it was not needed to remind him of his vow of vengeance.

The Mexican leader did all in his power, with voice and sword, but, despite his efforts, his followers broke and began to retreat.

The Rangers promptly pursued, for Palmer was shrewd enough to know that if left alone they would soon recover from their demoralization. To pursue them too far would be equally a mistake, for, under any circumstances, they were bound sooner or later to remember their superiority of numbers, and he must draw a line between the two extremes, an operation of considerable nicety.

In the midst of the pursuit his command sounded, and, as one man, the Texans wheeled their horses and swept away.

Their course was toward the northwest, for in that direction lay their most promising path of retreat, and they would run so near the chaparral, mentioned in our opening chapters, that they could take refuge there if hard pressed.

Looking back as they rode, they saw no sign of the Mexicans in pursuit, but they knew the whole pack would soon be at their heels, and the prospect was not a pleasant one.

Berta, having yielded herself a prisoner, did not play the part of a sulker, or attempt to delay the flight, and as Palmer saw how well she was riding and managing her horse, he fell back to her side and thanked her warmly.

Talbot was deeply impressed by the officer's manner, and more than ever he realized that few men possessed the nobility and solid common sense of his gallant leader.

Maxwell seized the opportunity to press to the side of the Kentuckian.

"Did you see Ribera while you were inside the *casa*?" he asked.

Talbot replied affirmatively.

"Where was he during the fight? I looked for him everywhere, but in vain. I do not think another member of his band escaped, but he either went over the wall or hid in some secure place."

He briefly related how Ribera had been disposed of after being overpowered.

The owner of the red lasso ground out a terrible regret between his teeth.

"I was in that very room," he added, "but I did not once think of looking behind the curtains. The Evil One protected his own and Ribera escaped me again, but the end is not yet. The number of those against whom my oath is directed is reduced to one, and I will yet serve him as he deserves!"

He held aloft the red lasso, and Talbot could not repress a shudder at his manner. He remembered how kind and quiet this man had ever been in camp and on the trail, before Luke Brastow died, and he realized how strong must be the man's nature to make him what he had become.

The progress of the party was very rapid; indeed, their horses were going at a telling gallop, and there was a good demand for all their speed. Their repeated affrays had reduced their number to twenty-three, all told, and as the Mexicans must number eighty, and could easily be reinforced from Don Eduardo's peons, the outlook, in case it came to a hand-to-hand fight, was dark enough.

CHAPTER XIV.

HARD PRESSED.

A MILE was soon passed and the prospect began to look a trifle brighter, though not one of the Rangers was foolish enough to believe they had seen the last of the Mexicans. The latter had for some time halted at the *casa*, where, of course, Captain Ribera would be found if no Texan had harmed him, and it was but natural to suppose the guerrilla would be in a fierce rage and urge his allies on to seek revenge.

Thus far, the captured horses had been retained, but Palmer had little hope of getting them to friendly soil, nor did he intend to cling to them if hard pressed.

They were riding with the chaparral on their left, and the major had questioned Talbot further in regard to it, but, as the latter had before said, it was a place little known, and if they were forced to take refuge there, they must depend on luck and circumstances.

The Kentuckian still rode beside Berta, but, in the darkness, he could not see the expression of her face.

"Affairs have taken a disagreeable turn for you, senorita," he observed, after Palmer left him.

"I do not think I am so badly off as you were a few hours ago," she replied, quietly.

"You have nothing to fear from our men. for Major Palmer never breaks his word, but this forced ride is not pleasant."

"I do not complain, thus far."

"Whatever occurs, I will do my best for you. I have not forgotten the aid you gave me."

"I trust you fully, Don Edwin."

The words were simple enough in themselves, but the inflection of her voice told far more and the Ranger felt a new thrill in his being. Little by little he was coming to have a new feeling toward this fair daughter of the tropics, and, in spite of his own precarious standing in the band, he was giving about all of his attention to her.

Jack Plunkett, who had been riding in the rear, pressed forward to the side of the major.

"What is it?" the latter quickly asked.

"I sorter opine the Greasers are comin'. I kin bear the poundin' o' bosses' hoofs in our rare, an', es I can't soliloquize any other cause for it, it follys that it be the inemy."

"Undoubtedly," answered Palmer, thoughtfully, "and we may expect a hot chase. What do you say, Jack, is it best to hang to the extra horses or let them go?"

"Wal, major, I kinder hate ter give 'em up."

"So do I, but we had better do that than to lose everything. I'm afraid they will have to go. Fall back to the extreme rear, Jack, and investigate. If the Greasers are after us in full force, as they doubtless are, we shall have to abandon the animals and ride for dear life."

"Correct, major."

He fell back a little in the body, but Palmer suspected from his manner that he would be glad if the Mexicans overtook them.

Jack Plunkett soon returned at a gallop.

"They're a-comin', major, an' like a troop o' wild stellyons. They must hev uncommon good hoss-flesh, too, for they're gainin' ev'ry second."

"It is as I expected, and we must no longer be burdened by the extra horses. Let them loose, men, and they may delay the enemy a trifle."

The order was promptly obeyed, and the animals, as though loth to leave their former company, settled into a responsive gallop, after a slight hesitation, and followed in the rear.

This did not trouble them; they knew that if the worst came, the three-score unriden horses would prove a temporary hindrance to the guerrillas.

With all their shrewdness, the Texans had failed to see a cunning move on the part of the Mexicans. Some one had used good judgment, and the delay in direct pursuit was not due to confusion or imbecility on the part of the foe.

The guerrilla leader had at once surmised what would be the course of the fugitives, and, holding back a portion of his force for a short time, he sent forty of his best mounted men away at full speed, directing

them to make a slight detour, get ahead of the Texans and so force them into a trap at a given point.

Thus it was that the devoted band, closely followed by the unriden steeds, which were in turn followed by the second force of guerrillas, suddenly dashed into a motte to see men arise on all sides of them, while a volley of bullets from ill-aimed carbines swept through their ranks, killing two men and wounding others; but, for the most part spending their fury on the empty air.

A responsive yell arose from the force in the rear, and Palmer comprehended that he was in a trap.

His clear voice gave the terse order to charge and the gallant Rangers tried to obey, but the odds were strongly against them and they were hurled back in a state nearing confusion.

Brief as the delay had been, it was enough for the first party to almost reach the spot, and only a simple obstacle saved the handful of Texans from instant annihilation.

The first party attempted to continue their progress, but they ran full into the unriden horses, which were rushing wildly about, and, despite their efforts, their advance was temporarily stayed.

Palmer did not lose his presence of mind. He saw how desperate was their situation, and he knew that but one thing could save them.

He gave the word in a voice subdued but clear, and, as one man, the Texans wheeled their horses and rode at a gallop toward the chaparral.

The dense wood loomed up darkly not far away, and, once in its shelter, there might be some hope, though the outlook was not promising.

The only one of the fugitives who was pleased with the prospect was Nathan Maxwell. He had managed to dispose of two guerrillas in the affray, and the fact fired his hot blood. Probably, at that moment, he would rather have died fighting than to have escaped.

No enemy appeared to oppose their fresh retreat, and the chaparral was soon reached. Once there, new troubles and plans lay before them. In many places the wood was too dense for the passage of horses, and even man would not have cared to force his way where cactus and mesquit lurked with their sharp thorns.

An entrance was safely made, and Palmer was half inclined to order a halt and make a stand against the guerrillas, but they came thundering toward the chaparral at that moment in such a formidable way that he decided to retreat further.

In this emergency the services of Edwin

Talbot were again required, for he, of all the band, was the only one who had ever before set foot inside the tangled wood.

He thought quickly and gave the major the benefit of his opinion. By withdrawing a little from the edge of the chaparral, ground would be reached where horses could not go, and at that point they could make a stand if they wished.

They must either do this or turn sharply to the right and ride along the edge of the wood, a course which would give the Mexicans a dangerous chance to outwit or overpower them.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE CHAPARRAL.

MAJOR PALMER perceived that the only hope for the Rangers lay in going still deeper into the wood, and they continued to retreat. They were soon obliged, by the low branches of the trees, to dismount and lead their horses, and after awhile they worked themselves into a place where even this way of progress became impossible.

They could hear the Mexicans in the distance, but, as none were near at hand, it seemed that they were perfecting their plans before making another advance.

"What shall we do now?" Palmer asked, addressing the Kentuckian.

"We have got into a very hot-bed of cactus and mesquit, and only two courses are open to us," our hero replied.

"Name them."

"Either we must abandon our horses and retreat on foot, or remain here and resist as best we can."

"We must retain our horses if possible."

"We should certainly be in a bad fix without them."

"They must be saved, but I do not like the idea of remaining here to let the enemy work at their will."

"Daylight cannot be over two hours away. When it comes we can see what kind of a place we are in."

"Before that time the iron gripe of the Greasers may be upon us, and, even if we are let alone till then, the coming of day will aid them as much as us."

"True," said the Kentuckian, absently.

"You have an idea. What is it?"

"Nothing brilliant. I was wondering if we could cut a path for retreat by means of our sabers."

"The plan does not promise much, but it is worth trying. Anything is better than to stand idly here and let the enemy do all the work."

The major began an investigation, but

there was little to be discovered. They were surrounded by thick and thorny bushes, and these, if cut away, must be demolished in total darkness.

The work was begun, but they soon found it a slow and difficult one. Bush after bush was cut down, but the progress was not calculated to encourage them. Still, an avenue was being opened, and more favorable ground might soon be reached.

Jack Plunkett wormed his way through the undergrowth into the space beyond. He was gone a considerable time, but when he came back his manner struck Palmer as being full of import.

"Well?" the officer eagerly questioned.

"Things might be wuss," answered the veteran. "Ef we kin hew our way a few rods further, we shall strike a mule-path, or some durned crooked avenue, an' onc't thar we kin go somers—I dunno whar."

"A path ahead? Hurrah! do you hear the news, boys? Work on, and we will yet outwit the foe."

"Wait a little, major," interposed Talbot.

"If there is a path some of the Mexicans may know of it, and if they do, won't they send a force that way themselves?"

"I didn't think of that," admitted the major,

"If there are only soldiers in their party, there is a hope that they do not know of the path," continued the Kentuckian, with clear logic; "but if Don Eduardo's peons are in the gang, they must be aware that the path is there."

"They do know it is there, as do all that belong to my father's hacienda," said Donna Berta.

"To where does the path lead, senorita?" asked the major, looking at her keenly.

"To a small glade where there is good water. It does not extend more than a hundred yards beyond here, and ends in wood as dense as we have at this point. The path is used by the cattle of our hacienda when they seek the water."

"How much do you know about this chaparral, senorita?"

"Very little. I have often been inside its edges, but the way is so difficult, I have never cared to explore it thoroughly."

"I suppose your peons know it well?"

"Many of them do, senor."

"I suppose there are few breaks in the trees and bushes?"

"There are none of consequence, I think. Nothing more than an occasional glade of small size."

"Well, we are nearly to the path, and we will go on. If we meet the guerrillas there, we will fight."

"Why not fight now?" interrupted Max-

well. "A bold dash may save us, but if we hang around here until day we shall be irretrievably in the trap."

"We have tried fighting and it would be madness to pit our handful of men against the odds of the Mexicans. We will on."

The cutting of the avenue continued, while the major stood silent and thoughtful. He was not in a pleasant mood. It looked very much as though what were left of his men were doomed to destruction; but, even if they escaped, he would probably be severely censured for leading them on such a disastrous mission. His reputation was at stake, and he did not see how to preserve it.

Maxwell, foreseeing the possibility that the horses would be abandoned, removed the red lasso from his saddle and wound it around his body. Come what might, the weapon of vengeance had a mission to perform, and only its accomplishment or the end of his own life could end the trail.

The seeming inactivity of the Mexicans began to grow suspicious. It did not seem probable that, with the handful of refugees almost within their grasp, they would hold idly back and give them time to escape.

There were but three ways of accounting for their backwardness—either they had no fear that the Texans would escape from the chaparral, or they were planning some cunning trap, or else they actually feared the deadly rifles, despite their preponderance of numbers.

All the party felt relieved when the workmen struck the path, but, before passing along it, they paused and listened intently.

Tropical woods abound in night birds and beasts that wander at night, but, besides their voices, all was silent in the chaparral. There was no sound from the guerrillas.

The advance was again commenced. The path was so narrow that they were obliged to move in single file, and Palmer, who insisted on leading the way, every moment expected to see the Mexicans spring up in his path; but the short distance to the glade was traversed without trouble.

Another halt was made in the glade. It was a mere break in the trees, where the fountain bubbled musically to the surface, and total silence reigned all around except for the sounds made by their own party.

The major glanced upward at the sky.

"Day is no more than an hour away," he observed.

"Our troubles begin anew then," said one of the men in a subdued voice.

"Are you discouraged, Peel?" asked the major.

"I would give a good deal to see Texan s'ile at this minute, I'll allow, but I won't complain while I have Texan tobacco in my

pocket," replied the man, in a tone which left no doubt of his courage.

The men were allowing their horses to drink at the fountain, and, in the meanwhile, Palmer stared straight into the darkness as though he hoped to find there some plan for his benefit.

"I wish we had a guide," he muttered.

"This is no place of safety for you," said Berta.

"Where can we go?"

"You can only go forward."

"Mesquite and cactus are there, and the bushes interlace like the threads of a spider's web."

"The guerrillas are behind," said Talbot, suggestively.

"You are right, and we will improve every minute. Resume work with your sabers, men, and we may reach a place better adapted for defense."

"We are leaving water if we leave here," suggested one of the men.

"There is a plenty in the chaparral, I think," assured the Kentuckian.

"Thirst ain't the inemy the most ter be dreaded," added Jack Plunkett.

"We will go forward," said Palmer, decisively. "We can't get into a worse situation, and there may be some good luck in store for us yet."

CHAPTER XVI.

A CATASTROPHE.

THE sabers of the men were once more busy. They made poor instruments for the work, but the wielders knew what was at stake and labored with zeal.

The chief actors of our story were waiting in silence. Talbot stood beside Berta, and as he looked down on her fair face he felt a strong desire to draw her to his arms as a shield from harm.

Perhaps their peril hastened the work, but, be that as it may, he felt his interest in her growing with each hour. She was one of those warm-hearted women occasionally met with whose affection is beyond price, and, gradually, he was coming to trust and believe in her implicitly.

Palmer stood with one hand resting on his saddle, stern and thoughtful, while Nathan Maxwell was at the rear, his glances roving about the darkness as though he really hoped to see an enemy appear.

It was a period of unpleasant suspense to all.

If the Texans had thoroughly explored the vicinity of the fountain when they first arrived, it might have saved them a severe misfortune, but they were not the first or last men who have committed a blunder, and

the calamity fell upon them when least expected.

As the band stood so still, awaiting the cutting of the avenue, they had not seen the hostile eyes peering at them from the darkness at one side of the glade; they had not seen the dark forms which emerged from the underbrush, their movements drowned in the noise made by the workmen, and there was no warning to any until the blow fell.

Major Palmer had fallen into deep thought, and, as several men moved to his side, he did not heed them or look to see that they were not of his band.

Suddenly, however, the whole of them, some five or six in number, flung themselves upon the officer, and in a twinkling he was lifted from his feet and borne toward the bushes.

He was taken by surprise, and did not realize his peril any sooner than the other Texans, and, by the time he had begun to struggle, a cry from his followers attracted the attention of all.

"The Greasers!" cried one impetuous Texan. "Shoot the dogs!"

"Hold, for your lives!" called out Jack Plunkett, hoarsely. "You will shoot the major. Foller me!"

He made a rush for the bushes, putting out his hands in advance to clear the way, but, to his surprise, only yielding branches and leaves opposed him, and he knew he had struck a path they had previously overlooked.

"Pursue, men, pursue!" shouted Talbot, alive to the trouble which would ensue if the major was lost.

As for himself, his post of duty was beside Berta, and he would not desert her.

The bushes opened and closed like a flash as Maxwell bounded in pursuit, and other men followed, until Talbot and Berta had no company except the man Nelson.

Even in the excitement of the moment, the latter could not forget his doubts of the Kentuckian, and he was resolved to give him no chance to desert.

The Kentuckian stood irresolutely in the center of the glade, his saber firmly grasped, and every moment expecting to see fresh enemies appear.

He listened intently to the sounds in the bushes, but after a little they ceased, and the chaparral became as silent as usual.

Berta pressed closely to the side of her champion, dismayed, for once in her life, for shadows of all kinds hung darkly around them.

"What shall we do?" asked Nelson, uneasily, after a pause.

"We can do nothing at present."

"Hadn't we better follow the men?"

"Why should we?"

"If the Mexicans advance now, we too shall be captured."

"We must remain to look to the horses. They are liable to break away if left alone."

"Can't we take them?"

"Impossible."

Nelson remained silent for a while longer, but he could not hide his uneasiness. In truth, the situation was too threatening for his nerves; he had bravery enough, as the world goes, but he did not like to face an unseen danger.

He began to press his point again after a pause, but just then sounds were heard in the direction in which the Texans had gone, and before long they came silently back.

Palmer was not at their head, and Talbot imperiously asked the first man concerning him.

"We did not find him," was the gloomy answer.

"Why did you turn back without him?" Talbot hotly demanded.

"The path ended and we could go no further. We came upon Jack Plunkett, insensible from some cause, and the way ended then."

Just then several of the men laid the unconscious Texan upon the ground, and Talbot knelt beside him.

A hasty examination showed that he was only stunned, and under a liberal application of water he soon began to revive.

The Kentuckian was almost discouraged. He knew that no one could lead the Rangers like their loved major, and everything looked dark for the future.

Berta had devoted herself to caring for Jack, as only a woman can, and under her efforts he soon recovered and sat upright.

"Jupiter crickets!" he observed, "I reckon summut wrong has happened. Yas, I remember, I run ag'in' a tree an' knocked my brains out. But whar is the major?"

"A prisoner, Jack," answered Talbot, sadly.

"A pris'ner, an' all you men around hyer! Thunderation! you orter be ashamed!"

The speaker sprung to his feet and glared fiercely around. His companions avoided his accusing glance, but the Kentuckian knew the past could not be undone.

"We still live," he quietly said.

"I'd rather die than ter lose the major."

"Let it be our work to rescue him, Jack," and Talbot extended his hand.

The Texan clasped it warmly.

"I'm with you to the death."

"Where is Maxwell?" continued Talbot.

No one answered at first, and it soon became evident that the life-hunter had not re-

turned with the others. In some way he must have found a passage through the bushes, providing he had not run upon the Mexicans and been killed.

Talbot believed the former idea correct and it set him to thinking. The Rangers had failed to find their way through, but, as the kidnappers had gone, there must, of course, be one, and it seemed advisable to find it at once.

The darkness was already taking on a gray tinge which foretold the dawn. Outside the chaparral it was probably fully light, but in those dense places night held stubbornly for the mastery.

The Kentuckian conferred with Jack and the others and all agreed on the necessity of moving at once. They were in a place ill-suited for defense, a way of retreat had been found, and, though there was danger of an ambush, it seemed best to look for more suitable quarters.

Edwin asked Jack Plunkett to take the lead temporarily, and, when others echoed the request, the worthy scout did not refuse.

The newly-discovered pathway was narrow and obscure, being totally unfit for horse-back riding, so each man took his steed by the rein, and the advance was begun in single file.

For a while all went smoothly, but, when they arrived where the Texan had before paused, some difficulty was experienced in penetrating the thorny bushes; but the increasing light aided them and they pushed on steadily.

CHAPTER XVII.

A BOLD UNDERTAKING.

DAY dawned in the chaparral and the Texans looked keenly about as they pressed forward, but there was nothing unusual to be seen. The tangled wood was around them, and the path so narrow that the branches flapped in their faces as they went.

It was fully daylight when they reached a small knoll which was more sparsely wooded, for boulders of all sizes lay around so thickly that trees and plants could only exist where they found foothold among the rocks.

Jack Plunkett was not slow to see something worthy of attention in the situation. The place was far better adapted for a fortress than the ground over which they had passed, and, as there did not seem to be any hope of an immediate escape from the chaparral, it struck him that a little work would make a refuge for them.

He paused and explained his views to his companions as they came up, but, naturally,

the majority of the Rangers were in favor of pushing on while they could.

Before the matter was settled, the arrival of Maxwell put a new face on the situation.

The life-hunter had not been idle, but, by indefatigable efforts, had scouted about the wood enough to learn a good deal which concerned them.

The Mexicans had evidently improved their spare time, for the scout declared that not only was there a force in the rear, but, somehow, another had been started from the west, thus placing the Texans between the two.

The information was very timely, for they might otherwise have run straight into the second party, and it was enough to settle the discussion.

Their retreat was cut off and their only hope was to occupy the knoll and make the best of it.

Accordingly, they at once moved to the top and began preparations for defense. The bowlders were mostly easily moved, and, after half an hour's work, a circular breast-work had been formed which was more valuable than might at first be supposed.

The rocks had been piled four feet high and the crevices filled with earth, thus making a wall through which a bullet was not likely to go.

While they worked, Edwin Talbot had been busily thinking. The enemy seemed in no hurry to attack them, and, if they intended to delay much longer, it would be the best and, perhaps, only chance to rescue Major Palmer.

He communicated his views to Jack Plunkett.

"I dunno," said the Texan. "I'm rayther jubous, on the whole, though I do want ter help the major uncommon bad."

"We must," declared Talbot, earnestly; "it is our only hope. No one else can govern the men and make them do their best."

"But how are we ter find him?"

"He must be with the western division of our enemies."

"Ef they ain't killed him."

"I don't believe they have. They might kill you or me, but his rank makes him a valuable prisoner."

"Wal, I am with you fur any ventur'. What do you propose?"

"Simply that we go on a scout and see what can be done."

"I'm with you, but what of the men?"

"They will only be minus two rifles and Baxter can stand at the helm until our return."

"So be it."

Talbot's chief regret lay in leaving Berta

without any especial protector, but there was no other way and they must trust to the Rangers.

He went to her and explained their intention. Her face changed color somewhat, but she assured them she would be well enough, and her only worry seemed to be in regard to the Kentuckian and the risk he would run.

The Texans made no objection to the plan. All were very anxious to have their loved leader back, and, as the only hope of his rescue seemed to lie in strategy, they were willing to trust Jack Plunkett and whoever he chose for a companion.

They looked carefully to their weapons, said good-by to their fellow Rangers and started from the knoll. Once, Talbot looked back and saw Berta standing with clasped hands, but the sight unnerved him and he waved a farewell and looked no more.

They entered the thicker chaparral and pushed on in the direction in which Maxwell had seen the second party of guerrillas.

"Do you expect to succeed?" asked Jack.

"We must!"

"Everything is ag'in' us, even ef we manage ter get our eyes on the major."

"I know it, but failure means ruin to us all."

"It has been an unlucky expedition."

"We cannot undo the past. Let us go on."

They went forward for a hundred yards and then came suddenly to an opening in the chaparral. The underbrush had prevented their seeing it until they stepped from cover, and Jack was about to comment when Edwin, who was in front, stepped back so suddenly as to collide with him.

"For your life, get to cover!" exclaimed the Kentuckian, catching him by the shoulder.

"What is it?" Jack demanded.

"Greasers!"

"In the glade?"

"Yes. Look for yourself."

Plunkett parted the bushes and obeyed. He saw an area of about one-fourth of an acre, free from trees, but a perfect nest of rocks. There was a peculiarity and symmetry about their situation, and, as Jack saw them one above the other, often with a smooth surface, he knew he was looking on the ruins of an ancient building.

Once it must have been one of some pretensions, and the fragments of wall still standing attested to the fact that the builders had done their work well; but wall, pillar and dome had yielded to the heavy hand of time and he saw only a ruin.

Stay! there was something more, for, amidst the broken walls he saw human beings and

their dress was the uniform of Mexican soldiers.

They had found the band they were seeking.

Jack drew quietly back.

"What now?" he asked.

But Talbot was looking earnestly and a new light soon appeared in his face.

"What do you see?" Jack demanded.

"Look by the tallest wall, on the northern side."

"The major, by thunder!"

"Yes," responded Talbot, "Palmer is there. They have bound him to that broken pillar and are now planning fresh mischief."

"We can't get at him."

"We must, Jack, or we are ruined. His presence with the Rangers is all that can save us. We must rescue him, and that, too, at once."

"The enemy are twenty to us two."

"We must do the work by stealth; we must crawl to him and set him free."

"It is sure death to try it. The Greasers would see an' kill us."

"Jack, I am going to try. It is ruin to leave him; it can be no more to fall in the attempt. I am going at once, trusting to the rocks and vines to hide me. If I am taken, go at once to the band and do what you can to escape."

Jack's face was gloomy enough, but he would say no more. It looked like going to certain doom, but there was truth in what Talbot had said and he knew the mettle of his comrade.

The Kentuckian laid down his rifle, looked to see that his knife was in place, and wrung Jack's hand.

"If I succeed," he said, "the men will no longer believe me a traitor. If I fail, good-bye for this world."

Plunkett silently pressed Edwin's hand in a vise-like gripe.

"If I fail, do what you can for Berta, Jack."

"I will, my boyee, I will!"

"Don't try to aid me, for your efforts will avail nothing against all these men, and your arm is needed with the band. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RESULT.

TALBOT had carefully marked out the course he was to take. The pillar to which Major Palmer was tied was about a hundred feet away, and one-half of this distance must be passed over with no cover except that of the slender vines which had overrun the ruins and spread back to the trees.

It looked like an impossibility to pass this distance unseen, but the Mexicans were deep

in conversation and no actual lookout was being kept.

The Ranger extended himself on the ground and Jack's pulses began to quicken as he moved from cover and began his dangerous crawl.

The adventurer moved silently but rapidly, drawing himself forward by means of the vines, and every movement took him nearer to the prisoner.

Jack Plunkett was greatly excited for one of his naturally cool nature. He looked nervously from Edwin to the Mexicans, and every moment he expected to see the alarm given.

Luck, or something more, must have been with the gallant Kentuckian, however, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief as he saw him reach the rocks and disappear.

So far all was well, but he was then fairly among the enemy, and only a few feet separated Palmer from the men in council.

A period of silence followed, but Jack knew if Talbot was idle it was from a good cause. He could no longer see him, but he would not halt half-way in his undertaking.

The watcher's eyes were on the major, and when he saw the latter start, as though in surprise, his own blood began to course with increased rapidity.

Palmer looked quickly behind him, hesitated, and then glanced at the Mexicans. They were talking with animation, disputing, if the signs were to be believed, and when men begin to quarrel they are liable to forget their duty.

Another moment, and the major moved from his position, and Jack saw that he was free from bonds. Talbot had not been visible, but he had evidently been busy.

The prisoner looked again at the Mexicans and then glided around the pillar and disappeared.

Plunkett could hardly avoid a shout of delight, but the danger was not yet over.

Another pause ensued, and then he saw his two friends appear at the edge of the ruins and looked toward his cover. He wanted to signal to them, but dared not.

The Texans dropped on their hands and knees and began to move rapidly toward the cover of the chaparral, and the broad face of Jack was all aglow.

Perhaps if they had used the former caution of Talbot, all would have been well, but it is natural to retreat quickly and the wood must have looked wonderfully friendly.

Half-way across the open space a shout arose from the ruins, the alarm cry of the baffled enemy, and at the first sound the Rangers bounded to their feet and ran for life.

A few paces took them to cover, and,

though half a dozen bullets followed them hissing, no damage was done and the major was caught in Jack Plunkett's arms.

It was, however, no time for sentiment. The angry shouts of the Mexicans arose behind them and they knew the pursuit would be prompt and vigorous. Talbot thrust one of his revolvers into Palmer's hand and then the flight was begun in earnest.

As they went, the major briefly told of his captivity, which had not been particularly unpleasant, and Jack chuckled over the rescue like a boy.

Talbot said little, but his heart was lighter, for he knew he had cleared his reputation with the Rangers.

The Mexicans were constantly heard in the rear, but they did not gain perceptibly, and at last the fort or knoll arose to the view of the pursued.

A suppressed cheer arose from the Texans as they caught sight of their leader, but it was no time for idle words. Palmer knew the enemy would soon be upon them and there was peril in delay.

A brief command from him sent every man to his post, the Rangers obeying as they always obeyed the major.

The thoughts of the latter were busy. He had been told of the discoveries made by Maxwell, and the fact that Ribera was in their rear with the main body of the Mexicans showed that the knoll would not long be a place of safety. Even if they managed to hold it against assault, hunger and thirst would soon conquer them.

This being the case, he resolved that if the smaller party could be beaten off decisively, they should promptly be followed and the advantage turned into a rout. He believed that, once at the old ruins, a much clearer way would be found by which they could leave the chaparral.

He had just finished explaining his views when the Mexicans came in sight. They broke from the cover in a straggling line, and then a cheer arose as they saw evidence that the knoll was occupied.

The leader pointed to the breastwork with his sword, shouted a command in Spanish, and then the guerrillas came bounding up the ascent.

Palmer was in no hurry to give the word for firing. Every one of his men knew how to use their rifles well, but he was determined that no lead should be wasted.

His signal came at last, and the Texans fired with careful aim.

At that distance there could be but one result, and, as they had taken care that no two men should aim at the same foe, the destruction was great, and one-half of the Mexicans went down, dead or disabled.

Then Palmer bounded over the breastwork, sword in hand, and his dashing Rangers followed.

Their appearance was enough to banish what little courage was left the guerrillas. Their leader had fallen, and those who remained alive were only a sorry remnant, and without lifting a hand to defend themselves, they turned and fled madly for cover.

Palmer and his men followed closely, while the others hastened the horses and began getting them under way.

Talbot had hastened to the side of Berta, but he hardly knew what to say to her. It seemed wrong to take her from her friends, and he said as much, but she declared that she would follow the fortunes of the Rangers, and he aided her to mount with a feeling of pleasure at her decision.

The knoll was quickly left behind, and the second detachment hurried along the path after the major and his squad. They were soon overtaken, for the Mexicans had disappeared, vanishing one by one into the denser parts of the wood, and the Texans hurried on toward the ruins.

Jack Plunkett led the way, and he remembered landmarks so well that when they neared the ruins he recognized the fact and advised caution before breaking cover.

His precaution was a wise one, for, as he and the foremost men peered through the bushes, they saw that the glade was again occupied.

Between them and the broken walls were a dozen men, and Berta started as she saw that the nearest of these were Captain Ribera and her father, Don Eduardo.

These two men were side by side, talking earnestly, and it was evident from their manner that the conversation was not an amicable one.

What followed was plainly heard.

"Your stupidity has done all this," said Ribera, angrily, and they saw that he was still under the influence of liquor. "If we had followed them promptly last night, not a man would have escaped."

"Very likely," replied the old don, "and my daughter would have been added to the list of the slain."

"What of that?" snarled the guerrilla. "She is no better than any other man's daughter, and she is a traitor to our cause. She aided the Texan to escape."

"By St. Catherine!" cried Don Eduardo, "I am tempted to strike you to my feet!"

"Try it!" sneered Ribera. "Or, perhaps you had better send for reinforcements. That was a brilliant idea of yours last night. We were four to one, but you must urge the plan of sending for more men, as though an army was needed, and so give the invaders a

chance to escape. Carejo! I doubt your own good faith, old man!"

"What do you mean?" shouted Don Eduardo.

"I mean that you are a traitor."

Only rum-madness would ever have led the guerrilla to use such words, and no one was surprised at the result.

In a moment the sword of Don Eduardo flashed in the air, while his face was pale from rage.

"Draw, coward!" he cried. "You shall learn how a Del Rio can avenge an insult!"

Ribera jerked his sword from its scabbard and the weapons clashed angrily, while the guerrillas looked on in dismay and indecision.

Under the cover of the bushes, however, were men who were less at fault. They had no respect for Ribera's rank, and they were resolved that he should not do harm to Del Rio.

Palmer looked at Berta and saw an imploring look on her pale face, but at that moment some one touched him on the arm.

He turned and saw Nathan Maxwell, and a shiver passed over his frame. The life-hunter looked like a veritable madman, and his face was dark from passion.

"The hour has come!" he hissed. "Ribera is the last of the assassins; let him die now!"

He held the *red lasso* aloft, and his teeth looked like wolf's fangs between his parted lips.

"So be it," said Palmer, with intense emotion, and with these words he bounded through the vail of bushes and stood before the astonished Mexicans.

One stroke of his sword sent Ribera's weapon flying several yards away, and a second brought the ruffian half-stunned to his knees.

By that time the other Rangers had appeared, and the guerrillas started to flee, but were stopped by the long rifles.

Ribera crouched on the ground, rubbing his head in a confused way, while Don Eduardo, with lowered sword, looked earnestly at Berta.

The girl hastened forward with extended hands.

"Forgive me, *padre mio!*" she softly said.

The old Don folded her in his arms tenderly.

"There is nothing to forgive, *mi querida,*" he said, "and I am only too glad to see you safe once more. Senor Texan, I am your prisoner; what is to be my fate?"

Major Palmer was shrewd enough to read more than the words conveyed.

"You are your own master, Don Eduardo," he courteously said. "We do not war on men with gray hair, and you are as free as any of us."

"Senor, you are a gentleman, and I should

be proud to be called your friend. The past night has opened my eyes, and I know Ribera for what he is—a ruffian and a coward. He is a disgrace to the cause I love, and I am forever done with his followers. Let me now say that you are in great peril, and your only hope is to leave here at once by the northern path."

"We are all ready, Don Eduardo, but we would like your company if it will please you."

"I will go with you," was the reply.

Palmer paused and looked at Ribera, but at that moment Nathan Maxwell glided forward. He held his red lasso in his hand and his face was implacable.

"Let our work be finished!" he soberly said.

"So be it! I will take Don Eduardo and the lady to cover, and then do as you will."

Ribera began to curse horribly, but Maxwell stood sternly over him until the bushes closed behind Berta; then strong hands seized the ruffian, the red lasso was noosed about his neck, and in three minutes he was dangling from the branch of a tree.

Luke Brastow was avenged!

We need not write in detail any longer.

The advice of Don Eduardo enabled the Texans to avoid any further danger, and, when darkness fell, they were in a place of comparative safety.

The hacendero and Berta left them there, for they had decided to go at once to the city of Mexico, and avoid further experience with guerrilla warfare, but the feelings of the Don had undergone a great change and his heart was warm toward the Texans.

Talbot and Berta had a long conversation, and when they parted, it was with the understanding that they should meet again at no distant time.

After that came further peril and fighting, in which all the Rangers participated, but their adventures do not belong to this story.

The Kentuckian had cleared his name with his companions and thereafter no one thought of accusing him of disloyalty. Palmer gallantly led the men to the end of the war, and Jack Plunkett and Maxwell bravely followed his fortunes.

The life-hunter recovered his cheerfulness in a measure, but he was never again what he had been before the death of Luke Brastow.

When peace was declared, Edwin Talbot married Berta, with the full consent of her father, and faithful Brigida was present at the ceremony.

Thus we leave our characters, with all happiness for the worthy, and with all good wishes for the patient reader, we write the last words of the story of the RED LASSO.

THE END.

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